

Contents

Contents page.....	i
List of tables.....	vii
List of figures.....	viii
List of appendices.....	ix
Acknowledgements.....	x
Abstract.....	xi
 Chapter 1.....	 1
Introduction.....	1
Aims of Thesis.....	1
Childhood Anxiety.....	1
Common Childhood Fears.....	2
Social Phobia (Social Anxiety Disorder).....	3
The Prevalence and Epidemiology of Social Phobia in Childhood.....	4
Functional Impact of Social Phobia.....	7
Summary.....	9
 Cognitive Models of Social	
Phobia.....	98
Cognitive	
Specificity.....	10,9
Beck, Emery, and Greenberg	
(1985).....	109

Clark and Wells	
(1995).....	101
Rapee and Heimberg	
(1997).....	143
Evidence for Cognitive Models of Social	
Phobia.....	143
Social-threat interpretations in	
childhood.....	165
Efficacy of Treatment using the Clark and Wells (1995)	
model.....	198
Conclusions.....	19
8	
The Development of Social	
Anxiety.....	2019
Anxiety in	
Families.....	2019
Developmental Models of Anxiety and Social Anxiety in	
Children.....	221
Threat-Interpretation in Parents and Children.....	26
Literature search	
strategy.....	286
Parent threat interpretations and child interpretation	
biases.....	28
7	
Child anxiety and child interpretation biases, and parental	
expectations.....	23
08	

Parent anxiety and threat interpretations, and parental expectations.....	31
---	---------------

~~29~~

Summary and

Conclusions.....	320
------------------	----------------

Rationale for the Present

Study.....	331
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Research

Hypotheses.....	335
-----------------	----------------

Maternal Anxious Cognitions and Child Anxious

Cognitions.....	35
-----------------	---------------

~~3~~

Child Anxiety and Child Anxious Cognitions, and Maternal

Expectations.....	35
-------------------	---------------

~~3~~

Maternal Anxiety and Maternal Anxious Cognitions, and Maternal

Expectations.....	36
-------------------	---------------

~~4~~

Chapter

2.....	375
--------	----------------

Method.....	37
-------------	---------------

~~5~~

Overview.....	375
---------------	----------------

Design.....	375
-------------	----------------

Participants.....	375
-------------------	----------------

Sample Size.....	375
------------------	----------------

Target Sample.....	386
--------------------	----------------

Recruitment of Sample.....	386
School Characteristics.....	397
Exclusion Criteria.....	397
Sample Characteristics.....	4038
Measures.....	420
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997).....	420
The Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale - Child version (Spence, 1998).....	420
The Spence Children’s Anxiety Scale – Parent version (Spence, 1998).....	442
Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory for Children (Beidel, Turner & Morris, 1995).....	442
The Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory (Turner, Beidel, Dancu & Stanley, 1989).....	453
The Ambiguous Situations Questionnaire (Creswell et al., 2005, 2006).....	464
Procedure.....	486
Ethical Considerations.....	497
Ethical approval.....	497
Confidentiality.....	497
Consent.....	497
Research	
Risks.....	497
Data	
Storage.....	5048
Data Analysis	
Procedure.....	5048

Chapter	
3.....	520
Results.....	52
0	
Overview.....	52
0	
Anxiety Symptoms	
Measures.....	520
Missing	
Values.....	520
Children's Questionnaire	
Scores.....	520
Mothers' Questionnaire	
Scores.....	572
Severity of Anxiety	
Scores.....	574
Ambiguous Situations	
Questionnaires.....	6154
Missing	
Values.....	6154
Data Management and Parametric	
Assumptions.....	6155
Descriptive	
Data.....	6656
Hypothesis	
Testing.....	7058

Maternal Anxious Cognitions and Child Anxious

Cognitions.....~~70~~
~~58~~

Child Anxiety and Child Anxious Cognitions, and Maternal expectations of their
Child.....~~70~~
~~8~~

Maternal Anxiety and Anxious Cognitions, and Parental
Expectations.....~~73~~
~~64~~

Chapter 4.....
~~75~~
~~62~~

Discussion.....
~~62~~
~~75~~

Chapter Overview.....
~~75~~
~~62~~

Research Findings

Summary.....~~75~~
~~62~~

Methodological

Critique.....~~76~~
~~63~~

Design.....~~76~~
~~3~~

Sampling.....~~77~~
~~64~~

Sample
size.....~~77~~
~~64~~

Child age.....~~77~~
~~64~~

Community
sample.....~~78~~
~~65~~

School	
selection.....	<u>7966</u>
Response	
rate.....	<u>7966</u>
Measures.....	
8067	
Self-report measures.....	
8067	
Anxiety measures.....	<u>8168</u>
Measuring social-threat and social-	
distress.....	<u>8168</u>
Depression.....	<u>8471</u>
Paternal factors.....	<u>8572</u>
Interpreting the Research Findings.....	<u>8572</u>
Maternal Anxious Cognitions and Child Anxious Cognitions	
Interpretations.....	<u>8673</u>
Child Anxiety and Child Anxious Cognitions, and Maternal	
Expectations.....	<u>8673</u>
Maternal Anxiety and Maternal Anxious Cognitions, and Maternal	
Expectations.....	<u>8774</u>
Implications of the Research Findings.....	<u>8876</u>
Theoretical Implications.....	<u>8876</u>
Clinical Implications.....	<u>9280</u>
Parental-involvement in CBT treatment for child social anxiety.....	<u>9380</u>
Preventative work in schools and communities.....	<u>9683</u>

Future Research.....	<u>9784</u>
Longitudinal and experimental designs.....	<u>9784</u>
Parenting behaviours.....	<u>9885</u>
Paternal influences.....	<u>9886</u>
Peer relationships.....	<u>9987</u>
Conclusion.....	<u>10087</u>
References.....	<u>10289</u>

List of Tables

Table 1	Descriptive Data for the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale and Social Phobia Inventory.....	<u>534</u>
Table 2	Non-significant Gender Differences on Self-report Measures of Anxiety.....	<u>557</u>

Table 3	Fisher's Exact Test Significance Values for Boys and Girls Elevated Scores on all Self-Report Measures.....	56
Table 4	Descriptive Data for the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (Parent Report).....	59 53
Table 5	Descriptive Data for Mothers' Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory.....	59 54
Table 6	Non-significant Gender Differences in Mothers' Report of Children's Anxiety	
Table 7	Correlations between SCAS-C and SCAS-P Total Scale and Subscales.....	60
Table 8	Correlations between Free-threat and Forced-choice Threat-interpretations on the Ambiguous Situations Questionnaires.....	62
Table 9	Scale Reliability Information for the Ambiguous Situations Questionnaires.....	65
Table 10	Descriptive Data for the Ambiguous Situations Task (Child Self-report version, Child Parent-report, and Parent Self-report).....	68 57
Table 11	Non-significant T-tests examining Gender Differences Across the Ambiguous Situations Questionnaires.....	69
Table 12	Correlations between Anxiety and Ambiguous Situations Scores.....	69 72

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12 pt

List of Figures

Figure 1	Continuum of social anxiety.....	65
Figure 2	A cognitive model of social phobia (Clark & Wells, 1995).....	124
Figure 3	An aetiological model of anxiety (Rapee, 2001).....	254
Figure 4	A cognitive-behavioural model of the intergenerational transmission of anxious interpretation biases (Creswell, Cooper, & Murray, 2010).....	253
Figure 5	An aetiological model of social anxiety (Rapee & Spence, 2004).....	275
Figure 6	Recruitment flowchart.....	4139

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Invitation Letter to Mother
Appendix B	Child Information Sheet
Appendix C	Mother Information Sheet
Appendix D	Mother Consent Form
Appendix E	Child Assent Form

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Abstract

Background

Developmental models of anxiety posit that anxiety may be partially transmitted environmentally from parent to child. Specifically, parents' own interpretative biases towards threat may result in parents conveying or reinforcing threat information to their children. The aim of this study was to investigate whether mothers' social anxiety symptoms and interpretation biases are associated with their children's social anxiety symptoms and interpretation biases.

Method

Participants (child and mother dyads) completed self-reported social anxiety measures and ambiguous situations questionnaires assessing threat-interpretation and anticipated distress across social and physical situations. After exclusions, 43 mother-child dyads were included in the analysis. Child participants were aged 9-11 years (22 girls, $M_{age} = 10.42$ years, $SD = 0.56$), and mother participants were aged 30-50 years ($M_{age} = 43$ years, $SD = 5.23$).

Results

Positive correlations were found between mothers' distress and threat-interpretations in self-relevant social situations and child distress and threat-interpretations in social situations. A significant positive association was found between child social anxiety and mothers' expectations of their child's social-threat. Similarly, positive correlations were observed between children's interpretations and distress in social situations and mothers' expectations of their child.

Discussion

The findings are broadly consistent with developmental models exploring the intergenerational transmission of anxious interpretations biases. Results are discussed in relation to methodological limitations (such as ecological validity of measures and shared method variance) and in relation to developmental models of social phobia. Clinical implications and future research suggestions are discussed.