

R. Nicholas Carleton, M.A., Kelsey C. Collimore, M.A., and Gordon J. G. Asmundson, Ph.D.
Anxiety and Illness Behaviours Laboratory, University of Regina, Regina, SK

Introduction

- Criterion A for a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) requires an event to be perceived as threatening to the physical integrity of oneself or others and induce extreme fear (APA, 2000); however, its clinical utility is often debated (Maier, 2006).
- Stressful life events not typically associated as causal mechanisms for PTSD (e.g., public humiliation) may also be considered by some as traumatic (Erwin et al., 2006).
- Indeed, evidence suggests relatively common negative social events, particularly public humiliation and teasing, can be interpreted as traumatic; these events may exacerbate or contribute to the development of social anxiety disorder (SAD; Hackmann et al., 2000).
- SAD is an anxiety disorder characterized by an intense and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations. In particular, individuals with SAD fear embarrassment or humiliation (APA, 2000).
- The purpose of the present study was to (1) explore whether people endorse negative social events as traumatic, (2) compare symptoms of social anxiety and posttraumatic stress among persons reporting a socially traumatic event relative to persons reporting a Criterion A event, and (3) evaluate the relationship between posttraumatic stress symptoms and social anxiety symptoms.

Method

- Participants included 284 undergraduates
 - 64 men, ages 18-34 ($M = 20.6$; $SD = 3.2$)
 - 220 women, ages 18-45 ($M = 20.2$; $SD = 3.3$)
- Demographics were supplemented with a questionnaire regarding traumatic life experiences that included whether the participant had ever experienced:
 - “Being publicly humiliated (worse than others)”
 - “Being ridiculed (very badly teased, worse than others)”
- Measures of social anxiety:
 - Anxiety Sensitivity Index-3, Social Subscale (ASI-3; Taylor et al., 2007)
 - Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale-II (BFNE-II; Carleton et al., 2007)
 - Social Phobia Inventory (SPIN; Connor et al., 2000)
 - Social Anxiety and Distress Scale, Likert Scale (SADS; Watson & Friend, 1969)
 - The aggregate short form of the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale and Social Phobia Scale (SIPS; Carleton et al., in press)
 - Posttraumatic Checklist-Civilian Version (PCL-C; Weathers et al., 1993)
- Participants endorsing a negative social event as being the most traumatic incident they had experienced were compared with participants who reported experiencing a Criterion A event on each of the self-report scales (Figure 1). Six percent of the sample reported no history of a traumatic event and were excluded from further analyses. Correlation analyses were run to evaluate the relationships between each social anxiety scale and the PCL-C.

Results

- There were no significant differences between men and women on the ASI-3 social subscale, BFNE-II, the SPIN, the SADS, or the SIPS (all $ps > .10$); however, women reported significantly higher scores than men on the PCL-C, $t(258) = 2.21$, $p < .05$, $r^2 < .02$, but the effect size was small.
- A total of 118 (42%; 36 men and 82 women) participants reported experiencing a traumatic social event. Proportionally, there were significantly more men (56%) than women (37%) who reported experiencing a social trauma, $\chi^2(1) = 7.35$, $p < .01$, $V = .16$. A total of 25 (9%) participants reported a negative social event as the most traumatic incident they had ever experienced. There were no significant differences between men (13%) and women (8%) who selected the social trauma as their most traumatic event, $\chi^2(1) = 1.41$, $p > .05$, $V = .07$.
- Significant differences were found between the participants citing a social trauma as their most distressing experience and participants endorsing Criterion A events on three of the social anxiety self-report measures (Table 1). No significant difference was found on PCL-C scores between participants reporting a social trauma as their most distressing experience and participants endorsing a Criterion A event.
- In participants endorsing a social event as their most traumatic event, a correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between each of the social anxiety related measures and the PCL-C total score (Table 2).

Discussion

- Several people endorsed negative social events as being traumatic. Among these, more men than women regard social events as traumatic. Relatively few people endorsed a negative social event as their most distressing experience; among these, men and women are comparably represented.
- Participants who endorsed a negative social event as their most traumatic experience reported higher scores on the BFNE-II, SIPS, and SPIN relative to those who endorsed a Criterion A event; significant negative social events appear associated with relatively higher levels of social anxiety.
- No significant difference was found in SADS and ASI-3 social subscale scores between persons reporting a negative social event as their most traumatic and those who endorsed a Criterion A event; the levels of social avoidance and distress and fears of socially observable anxiety reactions were comparable across groups.
- Posttraumatic stress symptom scores were comparable among those reporting a social trauma and those reporting a Criterion A trauma. Three participants met established criteria (Blanchard et al., 1996) for clinically significant posttraumatic distress related to the social event.
- Overall, these data suggest a significant relationship between social events perceived to be traumatic and symptoms related to SAD and PTSD. Future studies including larger samples with more substantial base rates for each trauma type are warranted.

Figure 1. Endorsement Rates for Traumatic Experiences

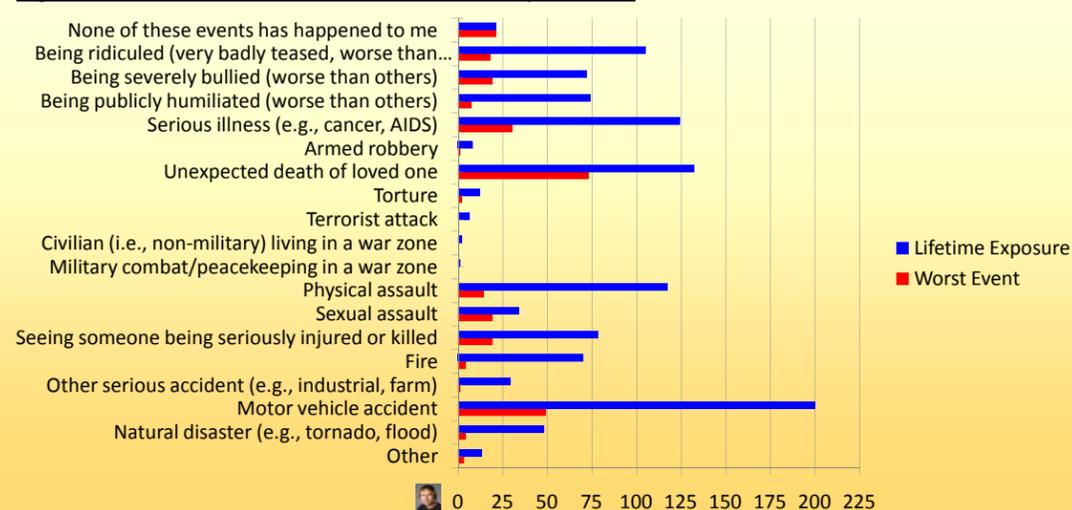


Table 1: Group Comparisons

	Social Trauma Worst (n=25)		Criterion A Trauma Worst (n=259)		t	df	p	r ²
	M	SD	M	SD				
ASI-3	8.08	5.83	7.53	4.56	.53	261	>.10	<.01
BFNE-II	18.08	9.11	13.07	8.77	2.68	261	<.01	.03
SADS	44.32	21.12	41.12	21.17	.66	261	>.10	<.01
SIPS	16.88	12.71	12.97	10.29	1.70	261	<.05	.01
SPIN	22.80	15.66	17.62	12.85	1.85	261	<.05	.01
PCL-C	27.56	12.09	28.40	13.35	.30	258	>.10	<.01

Table 2: Inter-subscale Correlations (n=25)

	ASI-3	SPIN	SADS	SIPS	BFNE-II
SPIN	.45				
SADS	.28	.85			
SIPS	.47	.86	.90		
BFNE-II	.50	.58	.49	.58	
PCL-C	.55	.56	.48	.56	.31