

# **‘It’s Just Your Imagination’: Fantasy Proneness and Social Anxiety**

## **Abstract**

Self-imagery plays a significant role in the development and maintenance of social anxiety (Hirsch, Clark and Mathews, 2006a). As a feared social event is anticipated, negative self-images become activated and this increases the experience of anxiety (Hirsch & Holmes, 2007). These continue to be present during the social event and become reinforced by negative interpretations of self-performance as well as by the responses of others (Hirsch, Clark, Mathews & Williams, 2003). Mental imagery is a key characteristic of fantasy proneness where the ability to generate vivid imagery forms part of imaginational ability (Sanchez-Bernados & Avia, 2004). This study investigated the relationship between fantasy proneness and social anxiety. As anticipation of a feared event plays a pivotal role in social anxiety; the establishment of a positive relationship between fantasy proneness (imaginational ability) and social anxiety may shed light on the role that imagination and fantasy play in how a socially anxious person imagines a feared event, which then contributes to the experience of social anxiety. The implications of a relationship between these constructs may indicate the role which imaginational ability (fantasy proneness) could play in underlying and maintaining social anxiety. Two self-report measures (the Creative Experiences Questionnaire and the self-report version of the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale) were administered to a sample of 50 non-clinical participants; 38 females and 12 males, within the age range of 19 to 52 years old. Both scales have been found to have adequate psychometric properties internationally (Fresco, Coles, Heimberg, Liebowitz, Hami, Stein and Goetz, 2001; Merckelbach, Horselenberg & Muris, 2001).

Whilst no psychometric information on the use of these scales in the South African context could be found, the results of this study will contribute to the use of these scales in South Africa. The results of these scales were statistically correlated revealing that, within the research design and methodology parameters of this study, a weak, but significant, positive, relationship was found between the constructs of fantasy proneness and social anxiety. The implication of this finding is that imagination, as a cognitive process, plays a role in social anxiety. Clinically this suggests that whilst imaginative processes play a role in underlying social anxiety, they can also be utilised adaptively in cognitively countering social anxiety in a treatment context.