Author's response to reviews

Title: Emotional but not physical maltreatment is independently related to psychopathology in subjects with various degrees of social anxiety: a web-based Internet survey

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Mrs. Olino,

Thank you very much for your friendly evaluation of our manuscript and for sending the reviewers’ comments. We have edited the manuscript according to the comments and we think that the paper has improved considerably as a result. The changes are marked as bold text in the revised manuscript.

We hope that the changes meet your expectations.

Yours sincerely, on behalf of the authors,

Benjamin Iffland

Here is our point-by-point discussion of the reviewers’ comments:

**Reviewer: Peter Cooper**

_This paper reports a study which examined the association between physical and emotional maltreatment (parental and peer) and social anxiety. They recruited their sample via the web and participants filled in several questionnaires. (There are serious limitations associated with such a sampling strategy, but these the authors consider satisfactorily in their discussion). Regression and mediation analyses revealed that parental emotional maltreatment and emotional peer victimization were independently related to social anxiety and mediated the impact of physical and sexual maltreatment on social anxiety. The authors conclude that ‘social anxiety symptoms are mainly predicted by emotional rather than physical or sexual types of victimization’._

_The study is clearly reported, although the fact that the paper was not written by a native English speaker does account for several inelegancies. The manuscript would benefit enormously from a careful editing. (e.g. “For the relationship between neglect or abuse and social phobia and psychopathology we found significant correlations on all subtypes of the CTQ and the event-list (see Table 2). However, the correlations between the emotional subscales and social phobia and psychopathology were found to be higher”. A few minutes of editing could improve this considerably)._  

This is done. Moreover, the revised manuscript has been edited by a native speaker to check for and correct grammatical and typological errors.

_There is some confusion over the regressions. We are told “...the physical maltreatment sum-score did not achieve significance on the SPS”. And in the next paragraph we are told “To investigate whether the association of physical_
maltreatment with the SPS is mediated by emotional maltreatment we conducted a test for simple mediation”. The confusion is, I think, between the regression and the correlations table. In any event, this requires some clarification.

The result that the physical maltreatment sum-score did not achieve significance in the regression analysis when it was controlled for emotional maltreatment indicates a mediation effect. When it was not controlled for emotional maltreatment, physical maltreatment was significantly related to the SPS, SIAS and BSI (see also the correlations and the regression coefficients in Figure 1). For clarification, the following sentence was added: “Without controlling for emotional maltreatment, physical maltreatment is significantly associated to the SPS, the SIAS and psychopathology (see Figure 1).” (page 9)

This paper is of interest and probably should be published. The problem I have with it is that the authors assiduously review a large body of data which already attests to the veracity of their central findings - so what the current study adds to existing knowledge is never made clear. Indeed, rather less genuflection to the earlier literature might help the cause of this paper. That is, rather than detailing the findings of each and every study, a general conclusion about the current state of knowledge, together with highlighting the gaps, which this paper sets out to address, would make clear the contribution to the field of this study.

Thank you for your advice. In the introduction, we reduced the amount of reported studies and focused on highlighting the limitations of former studies that this study tried to address. A paragraph was added to the discussion to point out more clearly what the present study adds incrementally to existing findings (page 14).

Reviewer: Mostafa amr

Reviewer's report:
Overall:
The primary objective of the reviewed manuscript was to examine the association between emotional maltreatment, including parental emotional maltreatment as well as emotional peer victimization, and social anxiety symptoms in socially anxious subjects. The study was conducted with a sound statistical analysis as a web-based Internet survey of participants and the assessment included measures of child maltreatment, emotional peer victimization, social anxiety symptoms and general psychopathology. Findings from the study demonstrated that parental emotional maltreatment and emotional peer victimization were independently related to social anxiety and mediated the impact of physical and sexual maltreatment. While the reviewed manuscript offers some interesting clinical information regarding the population under study, I am concerned about the degree to which it can add to the extant information concerning the role of abuse in SAD. There are no major compulsory comments but only minor ones that should be addressed.

Introduction:
1. In general, I felt that additional information should be included in the introduction. The manuscript would be strengthened considerably by going into
more detail about previous studies of social phobia emotional abuse and its definition and how the authors’ build upon previous work in the German population. The authors provide some detail in the Discussion regarding these studies, but I recommend providing this information in the Introduction.

With respect to the editor’s advice we followed the suggestions of reviewer Cooper in relation to the introduction.

Methods:
1. The authors could provide a richer descriptions of their participants and methods. Are they all German. Does they belong to certain areas or they are uniformly distributed, their age, level of education and duration of their symptoms of social phobia, only the gender is mentioned, do you expect that these demographic variables may play a role in mediating the effect of emotional abuse on physical abuse and its role in Psychopathology.

In table 1, we added information about the nationality, educational level and employment of the present sample. For economical reasons and to avoid dropouts, we abstained from asking for more subject characteristics. Conducting studies on the Internet requires short designs which can be accomplished rapidly. We suggested participants were more likely to exit the web page the longer the study continued.

2. The authors used the German version of the CTQ as their primary outcome measure. They should provide additional information regarding the reliability and validity data from prior research and the current sample.

We have added the following sentences on page 6:
“The psychometric properties of the German version were similar to the original version and it has been shown to be a reliable and valid screen for childhood maltreatment. Internal consistency of all scales except physical neglect was shown to be high (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .89$). Correlations with self-reported measures for posttraumatic stress, dissociation and general psychopathology were low to moderate [23]. In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .87$ for all items. Apart from physical neglect (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .64$), internal consistency of all scales was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha > .87$).”

Discussion:
1. The paragraph (1) did not appear to make sense in the start of the Discussion and should be delayed to the end of discussion.

Thank you for this advice. We considered delaying the paragraph to the end of the discussion but concluded that it may be helpful for the reader to get a short summary of the results before they are discussed.

2. More details needs to be provided regarding the social maltreatment in paragraph 3, page 14

As any type of maltreatment has an emotional impact, the well-established denomination
'emotional maltreatment’ seems to be unfortunate. Therefore, we preferred to use a more appropriate and selective term; ‘social maltreatment’. However, as this may be confusing, we have now replaced ‘social maltreatment’ with ‘emotional maltreatment’ in the manuscript hoping that this will aid comprehension.

3. In the results section, emotional maltreatment showed significant scores on almost all BSI scales except for summarization, what is your interpretation.

As stated on page 11, the difference between emotional and physical maltreated subjects on the BSI subscale somatization did not achieve significance ($t(237) = 2.86, p = .005$). Since this is rather a ‘non-effect’ than an ‘effect’, it is difficult to interpret. Adjusting for multiple testing requested a level of significance of $p < .004$. Therefore, interpreting this ‘non-effect’ is even more difficult as it remains unclear whether it is due to multiple testing or a difference between the two groups.

**Reviewer:** Claire Marnane

**Reviewer’s report:**
Overall, I found the report to be well thought-out, the research questions well-defined, and the conclusions drawn to be appropriate. In particular, the various negative issues associated with obtaining data through relatively unregulated internet surveys has been well-detailed in the limitations section, as it should be. That said, there are some changes to the manuscript which should be considered.

Thank you very much for these comments.

**Major compulsory revisions**

1. I find the title and abstract misleading in referring to the sample as having social anxiety, as the sample wasn’t selected after potential participants were screened for social anxiety. Moreover, almost 35% of participants didn’t reach the threshold for that diagnosis on the SPS and their scores were not excluded from analysis.

This is true. We tried to address and clarify this by referring to “subjects with various degrees of social anxiety” (pp. 1-2)

2. The authors make no mention of the high prevalence of females in the sample, despite the evidence that social anxiety is one of the few anxiety disorders where the male to female ratio tends to be more even. This is particularly worthy of mention, given the acknowledgement the authors did make in the limitations section about the possibility of an unrepresentative sample being achieved through self-selection on an internet survey.

This is true. We extended the section on limitations of generalizability by adding the following passage in page 13:
“In addition, the generalizability of our findings is limited by the high rate of female participants. Population-based studies showed that social anxiety disorder is more prevalent among women [45,46,47]. However, in clinical samples prevalence rates were found to be equal for both sexes. For further studies, a more appropriate sex ratio would be desirable.”

3. It would be helpful to know what the cut-off scores on the SPS are which indicate threshold-level social anxiety, to make better sense of the data tables. Table 1 in particular seems a little meaningless in the absence of any information about normative scores and clinically significant threshold scores for the various questionnaires reported therein.

For a better evaluation of the sample, we added cut-off scores for all measures.

Page 6: “Cut-off scores of 20 on the SPS and 30 on the SIAS indicate a clinical relevant level of social anxiety”
Page 8: “Maltreatment is assumed when threshold scores for emotional abuse (10), emotional neglect (15), physical abuse (8), physical neglect (8) and sexual abuse (8) are met.”
Page 9: “…the norm score of adult non-patients (M = .31, SD = .23)…”

4. I think the paper would benefit from a greater amount of information about the emotional peer victimisation rating. The report states simply that it has been validated, but just looking at the example questions detailed in the paper I wonder at the ability of the measure to provide results of clinical significance, eg “being laughed at in front of peers”. Given that this was a self-reported set of data with no single aspect confirmed through a clinical interview, this does seem a cause for concern, especially since a sample of socially anxious subjects are likely to interpret social situations negatively and reflect this in the questionnaire responses. The authors appropriately draw attention to the possibility of recall biases in retrospective reports such as this in the limitations section, however I think they fail to identify the high likelihood of negative recall bias inherent in asking a socially anxious population to recall incidences from their past which are worded in the form of descriptions of negative social interactions.

In the method section, we added information about the stability and validity of the FBS. As the FBS was recently developed, information is limited to unpublished data.

pp 7-8: “The total-score showed a satisfying stability over a period of twenty months (r = .89). Construct validity has been confirmed through correlations with measures of psychological symptom distress and social anxiety. Moderate correlations with the scales of the CTQ indicate that the FBS assesses an additional construct of child maltreatment. Hence, use of the FBS allows estimation of the cumulative effects of varying kinds of child maltreatment. For this study, the sum score of both scales was used as indicator of emotional peer victimization during development.”
In the discussion, we emphasized the higher likelihood of socially anxious subjects for recall biases of negative social interactions by adding the following sentence: “Particularly socially anxious subjects may be more likely to overestimate the occurrence of negative social situations as measured by CTQ and FBS.” (page 14) However, we do not expect that the FBS is more prone to such recall biases than the CTQ or other measures of child maltreatment.

**Minor essential revisions**

1. There are just a few grammatical and typographical errors scattered throughout which need correction, eg a large gap between two sections, and an apparent error in the labelling of one of the tables.

Done. Moreover, the revised manuscript has been edited by a native speaker to check and correct for grammatical and typological errors.