Reviewer’s report

Title: Emotional but not physical maltreatment is independently related to psychopathology in socially anxious subjects: a web-based Internet survey

Version: 1 Date: 8 January 2012

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.

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 threshold for that diagnosis on the SPS and their scores were not excluded from analysis.

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.

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.

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.

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.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.