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Attention Bias to Threat as a Mediator Between Childhood Behavioral Inhibition and Social Anxiety: A Structural Model

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examined whether attention bias to threat statistically accounts for part of the association between retrospectively reported childhood behavioral inhibition and current social anxiety symptoms in adults.

Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional correlational study included 250 adults aged 20–45 years recruited in the Isfahan University context, Iran, by convenience sampling. Participants completed the Retrospective Measure of Behavioral Inhibition and the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale and performed a computerized dot-probe task. Structural modeling was conducted in SPSS 26 and AMOS 24. Indirect effects were evaluated with 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

Findings: Behavioral inhibition was positively associated with attention bias (β= .32, p<.001) and social anxiety (β= .39, p< .001), while attention bias was associated with social anxiety (β= .43, p< .001). The reported indirect effect was .14 (95% CI [.08, .22], p < .001). Model-fit indices were RMSEA = .05, CFI = .94, GFI = .92, and χ^2/df = 2.18.

Conclusion: The results are consistent with a cognitive–temperamental account in which threat-related attention may statistically link childhood inhibition with adult social anxiety. Because the design is cross-sectional and childhood inhibition was assessed retrospectively, the indirect effect should not be interpreted as evidence of temporal or causal mediation. Replication with longitudinal designs and more reliable attention-bias measures is warranted.

Keywords: Behavioral inhibition, Attention bias, Social anxiety, Dot-probe task, Structural equation modeling.

Introduction

Social anxiety disorder is characterized by persistent fear of negative evaluation, embarrassment, rejection, or scrutiny in social and performance situations and can substantially impair academic, occupational, relational, and health-related functioning (Alomari et al., 2022; Koyuncu et al., 2019). Epidemiological work across countries shows that clinically meaningful social anxiety is common in young people, although prevalence varies with age, setting, and assessment strategy (Alves et al., 2022; Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). Cognitive accounts emphasize fear of negative evaluation, threat monitoring, negative self-representations, and avoidance as processes that can maintain symptoms once anxiety has developed (Warnock-Parkes et al., 2022).

A developmental perspective adds temperament to this account. Behavioral inhibition is an early-emerging tendency to respond to unfamiliar people, objects, or situations with wariness, withdrawal, and cautious behavior. Longitudinal and meta-analytic evidence indicates that childhood behavioral inhibition increases later risk for anxiety, particularly social anxiety, while also showing that the developmental pathway is probabilistic rather than deterministic (Fox et al., 2023; Sandstrom et al., 2020). Distinguishing social from non-social forms of inhibition may further refine prediction of later psychosocial outcomes (Tan et al., 2024). In Iranian clinical and community research, inhibition has also been incorporated into structural models of anxiety, suggesting that temperament may operate within broader family and cognitive systems (Rostami et al., 2024).

One candidate mechanism linking inhibition and social anxiety is selective attention to threat. Threat-related attentional bias refers to systematic differences in orienting toward, disengaging from, or avoiding threatening information. Classic experimental work demonstrated that anxious individuals can process threat cues differently even when awareness is limited (Mathews & MacLeod, 1986). Neurocognitive studies further suggest that behavioral inhibition, attention to threat, and social anxiety can be jointly reflected in neural responses to emotionally salient information (Thai et al., 2016). This provides a plausible cognitive–temperamental model in which early inhibition increases sensitivity to potential social threat and, under some conditions, threat-focused attention contributes to the maintenance of social anxiety.

The empirical literature is nevertheless mixed. Reviews have questioned whether a stable, unitary threat bias characterizes social anxiety and have emphasized the heterogeneity of attention processes across tasks and time (Wermes et al., 2018). A longitudinally informed study also reported that early behavioral inhibition predicted later social anxiety independently of attentional bias, cautioning against treating attention as the only developmental mechanism (Van Bockstaele et al., 2021). At the same time, cognitive-bias interventions remain clinically relevant in social anxiety research, including recent work comparing cognitive bias modification with mindfulness-based cognitive therapy in university students (Tahmasebi et al., 2025).

Measurement is another important issue. The dot-probe paradigm has been widely used to operationalize attentional bias, but reliability of traditional reaction-time difference scores is often modest or poor. Studies in social anxiety and broader methodological work have therefore recommended cautious interpretation, preregistered data-cleaning rules, and attention to alternative or trial-level indices (Meissel et al., 2022; Molloy & Anderson, 2020). These concerns are especially important when a dot-probe score is used as a mediator because measurement error can attenuate or destabilize estimated indirect effects.

Against this background, the present study examined whether attention bias to threat statistically accounted for part of the association between retrospectively reported childhood behavioral inhibition and current social anxiety symptoms among adults recruited in Isfahan, Iran. The hypothesized model specified paths from behavioral inhibition to attention bias and social anxiety and a path from attention bias to social anxiety. Because all focal variables were measured within a cross-sectional study, the indirect path is interpreted as a statistical mediation pattern rather than proof of temporal or causal mediation.

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Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

A cross-sectional correlational design was used. The study included 250 adults aged 20–45 years recruited in the Isfahan University context through convenience sampling during winter 2024. Women represented 54.4% of the sample and men 45.6%. Inclusion criteria were age 20–45 years, ability to complete the electronic measures and computerized task, and willingness to participate. Incomplete records were excluded. The sampling strategy and geographically concentrated recruitment limit population generalizability. All participants provided informed consent and confidentiality was maintained. The supplied manuscript did not report a formal institutional ethics approval code; this information should be documented in the journal record if available.

The sample size was considered adequate for the reported structural analysis in relation to conventional SEM guidance, although adequacy ultimately depends on model complexity, measurement quality, distributional assumptions, and parameter estimation rather than a single universal participant-to-parameter ratio (Kline, 2023).

Instruments

Social anxiety was assessed with the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS), a 24-item instrument covering fear/anxiety and avoidance across social interaction and performance situations (Liebowitz, 1987). Items are rated from 0 to 3 for fear and avoidance. The Persian version has demonstrated acceptable reliability and construct validity in Iranian student samples (Khoshouei, 2007). In the present sample, the reported internal-consistency coefficient for the total LSAS score was $\alpha = .92$.

Retrospectively reported childhood behavioral inhibition was measured with the Retrospective Measure of Behavioral Inhibition (RMBI) developed by Gladstone and Parker. The measure was designed to assess a behaviorally inhibited temperament style recalled from childhood and has shown convergent validity with earlier retrospective inhibition measures (Gladstone & Parker, 2005). Childhood inhibition measured retrospectively has also been associated with lifetime anxiety disorders in clinical samples (Gladstone et al., 2005). In the present study, the RMBI showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$).

Attention bias to threat was assessed with a computerized dot-probe task. Threat-related and neutral stimuli were presented simultaneously for 500 ms, followed by a probe replacing one of the stimuli. Participants responded to the probe location as quickly as possible. The conventional attention-bias score was computed from reaction-time differences between incongruent and congruent trials, with positive values interpreted as greater vigilance toward threat. Because the dot-probe score is a reaction-time difference index rather than a conventional reflective questionnaire scale, Cronbach's alpha is not an appropriate stand-alone reliability claim. Contemporary evidence indicates that classic dot-probe bias scores may show low reliability (Meissel et al., 2022; Molloy & Anderson, 2020), and the present findings are therefore interpreted with measurement caution.

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations summarized the observed associations. Skewness ranged from −0.32 to 0.45 and kurtosis from −0.19 to 0.67 in the supplied analysis, supporting approximate univariate normality. Variance inflation factors were below 2.5. The structural model estimated direct paths from behavioral inhibition to attention bias and social anxiety and from attention bias to social anxiety. The originally reported model had 24 degrees of freedom. Fit was evaluated using RMSEA, CFI, GFI, and χ^2/df, with conventional interpretive benchmarks used descriptively rather than as rigid decision rules (Kline, 2023).

The indirect association between behavioral inhibition and social anxiety through attention bias was tested with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and a 95% confidence interval. An indirect effect was considered statistically supported when its confidence interval did not include zero. Given the cross-sectional design, the term "indirect effect" is preferred to

causal language such as "mechanism" or "developmental mediation."

Findings and Results

Participant Characteristics

The demographic distribution is summarized in Table 1. The sample was predominantly younger than 31 years, slightly more than half were women, and most participants were single. The age-category label was harmonized with the stated eligibility range so that the youngest category begins at age 20 rather than age 18.

Table 1.

Demographic characteristics of the study sample (N = 250)

Characteristic	n	%
Age 20–30 years	153	61.2
Age 31–40 years	72	28.8
Age 41–45 years	25	10.0
Female	136	54.4
Male	114	45.6
Single	177	70.8
Married	64	25.6
Divorced/widowed	9	3.6
High-school diploma	79	31.6
Bachelor's degree	120	48.0
Postgraduate qualification	51	20.4

Bivariate Associations

Behavioral inhibition was positively correlated with social anxiety ($r = .48$, $p < .01$) and attention bias to threat ($r = .34$, $p < .01$). Attention bias was also positively correlated with social anxiety ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). These associations were in the expected direction and provided a descriptive basis for the structural model. They are reported in Table 2.

Table 2.

Pearson correlations among the principal study variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Childhood behavioral inhibition	—		
2. Attention bias to threat	.34**	—	
3. Social anxiety	.48**	.50**	—

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Direct and Indirect Effects

The structural coefficients are shown in Table 3. Behavioral inhibition positively predicted the attention-bias score ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and social anxiety ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). Attention bias also positively predicted social anxiety ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$).

Table 3.

Standardized direct effects in the structural model

Path	β	SE	CR	p
Behavioral inhibition → Attention bias	.32	.07	4.57	< .001
Behavioral inhibition → Social anxiety	.39	.09	4.33	< .001
Attention bias → Social anxiety	.43	.06	7.17	< .001

The bootstrap indirect effect is reported in Table 4. The behavioral-inhibition → attention-bias → social-anxiety path was statistically different from zero (indirect effect = .14, 95% CI [.08, .22], $p < .001$). Because the direct path from behavioral inhibition to social anxiety remained significant, the numerical pattern is compatible with partial statistical mediation. The design, however, does not establish the temporal ordering required for a causal mediation claim.

Table 4.

Bootstrap indirect effect

Indirect path	Effect	95% CI	p	Interpretation
Behavioral inhibition → Attention bias → Social anxiety	.14	[.08, .22]	< .001	Significant indirect association

Model Fit

The reported fit indices are summarized in Table 5. RMSEA = .05, CFI = .94, GFI = .92, and $\chi^2/df = 2.18$ were within commonly used descriptive ranges for acceptable fit. Fit indices do not by themselves establish causal validity or measurement quality, and the model should be interpreted together with the study design and the psychometric limitations of the attention-bias indicator.

Table 5.

Reported fit indices for the final structural model

Fit index	Conventional benchmark	Observed
RMSEA	< .08	.05
CFI	> .90	.94
GFI	> .90	.92
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.18

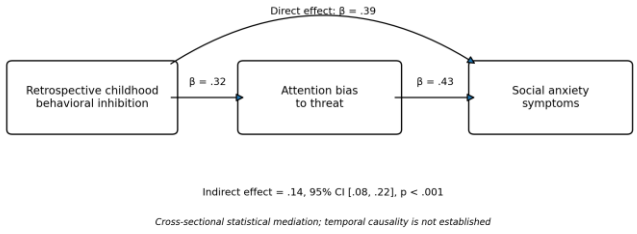


Figure 1.

Reported structural pathways and bootstrap indirect effect

The pathway summary in Figure 1 visualizes the reported standardized coefficients. The figure should be read as a representation of cross-sectional associations, not as evidence that behavioral inhibition temporally causes attention bias or that attention bias subsequently causes social anxiety.

Discussion and Conclusion

The principal finding was a statistically significant indirect association between retrospectively reported childhood behavioral inhibition and current social anxiety through an attention-bias score. The direct path from behavioral inhibition to social anxiety also remained significant. This pattern is consistent with a cognitive–temperamental formulation in which early inhibition and current threat-related information processing are jointly associated with social anxiety. It also fits broader developmental evidence linking behavioral inhibition with later anxiety (Fox et al., 2023; Sandstrom et al., 2020).

The direct path from behavioral inhibition to social anxiety is theoretically plausible because inhibition is not simply a cognitive style measured in adulthood; it is conceptualized as a temperament characterized by heightened wariness and withdrawal. Retrospective measures cannot recreate prospectively observed temperament, but they may capture stable autobiographical perceptions of inhibited behavior. The development and validation work on the RMBI supports its use as a retrospective indicator (Gladstone & Parker, 2005), and clinical evidence links retrospectively reported inhibition to lifetime anxiety disorders (Gladstone et al., 2005). Nonetheless, recall bias and current symptom state can influence retrospective reports and should be considered when interpreting the present path coefficient.

The association between attention bias and social anxiety also aligns with cognitive theories emphasizing selective processing of threat. People with social anxiety may allocate attention preferentially to signs of criticism or rejection, have difficulty disengaging from them, or alternate between vigilance and avoidance. Such processes can increase the subjective availability of social threat and reinforce negative self-appraisals (Warnock-Parkes et al., 2022). Neurocognitive evidence further indicates that inhibited temperament and attention to threat can be jointly represented in brain responses during development (Thai et al., 2016).

At the same time, the present findings should not be read as resolving the debate about attentional bias. The relation between behavioral inhibition and later social anxiety has been observed even when attentional bias does not statistically explain that association (Van Bockstaele et al., 2021). Reviews of social anxiety also emphasize that attentional patterns vary across tasks, stimuli, processing stages, and individuals (Wermes et al., 2018). Therefore, a single dot-probe index is unlikely to capture the full cognitive pathway from temperament to social anxiety.

The measurement properties of the dot-probe task are especially relevant. Traditional difference scores can have poor test–retest reliability and low internal consistency, including in samples with social anxiety (Molloy & Anderson, 2020). Broader psychometric analyses similarly caution that response-based attention-bias measures may not provide sufficiently stable individual-difference scores for strong mediation claims (Meissel et al., 2022). In this context, the significant indirect effect in the current data is

best viewed as a sample-specific statistical pattern requiring replication with more reliable indices, eye-tracking, trial-level modeling, or multimethod attention measures.

The Iranian context is also relevant. Social expectations concerning interpersonal evaluation, family and academic achievement, and public self-presentation may shape how anxiety is experienced and reported. The present study does not directly test cultural mechanisms, so cultural explanations should remain hypotheses rather than conclusions. Still, the use of an Iranian sample adds contextual value, particularly because culturally situated models of inhibition and anxiety have been reported in IJBMC research (Rostami et al., 2024).

From an intervention perspective, the results do not demonstrate that modifying attention will necessarily reduce social anxiety, but they support continued evaluation of cognitive-bias processes as one potentially modifiable component. Cognitive bias modification has been studied in university students with social anxiety and can be compared with broader cognitive and mindfulness-based approaches rather than treated as a stand-alone mechanism (Tahmasebi et al., 2025). Clinical interventions should also address negative self-evaluation, avoidance, safety behaviors, and interpersonal learning because these processes are central to contemporary cognitive formulations of social anxiety (Warnock-Parkes et al., 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations qualify the conclusions. First, the study was cross-sectional; therefore, the reported indirect effect does not establish temporal mediation. Second, childhood behavioral inhibition was measured retrospectively, making the predictor vulnerable to recall and reconstruction biases. Third, the convenience sample was recruited from a single urban university context in Isfahan, limiting generalizability. Fourth, the LSAS and RMBI are self-report measures and may share method variance, whereas the dot-probe is a behavioral reaction-time task with known reliability concerns. Fifth, the supplied manuscript reports a structural model with 24 degrees of freedom but does not fully document the indicator-level measurement specification; future reports should provide the complete model diagram, indicator structure, covariance specification, missing-data handling, and estimator details so the analysis is fully reproducible.

Future studies should prospectively follow behaviorally inhibited children into adolescence and adulthood, assess threat processing repeatedly, and examine whether within-person changes in attention predict changes in social anxiety. Multimethod designs combining behavioral tasks, eye tracking, ecological momentary assessment, and psychophysiological or neural measures would improve construct validity. Preregistered data-cleaning rules and alternative attention-bias indices may also reduce analytic flexibility. Finally, replication across diverse Iranian regions and cultural contexts would clarify which parts of the model are general and which are context dependent.

Conclusion

The findings support a structural association in which retrospectively reported childhood behavioral inhibition is related to adult social anxiety both directly and indirectly through a threat-related attention-bias score. The bootstrap indirect effect was statistically significant, while the direct effect remained present, producing a pattern compatible with partial statistical mediation. The study contributes to a cognitive–temperamental account of social anxiety but does not establish developmental causality. Stronger longitudinal designs and more reliable measurement of attention bias are required before attention bias can be considered a confirmed mechanism linking childhood inhibition with adult social anxiety.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to the study and manuscript preparation.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. A formal institutional ethics approval number was not provided in the supplied manuscript and should be added to the journal record if available.

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