PLACEBO EFFECTS IN THE TREATMENT OF MALE DATING ANXIETY

KARL F. NEUMANN, JOSEPH W. CRITELLI, CATHERINE S. K. TANG
and LAWRENCE J. SCHNEIDER

North Texas State University

Summary — The outcomes of cognitive-behavioral and high credibility placebo group treatments were compared in a sample of nineteen heterosocially anxious males. At post-test and at a 3-month follow-up, both treatments showed improvement on self-report measures of interpersonal functioning (p < 0.05). The cognitive-behavioral treatment showed a consistent pattern of improvement on self-report and behavioral measures of anxiety (p < 0.05), but, overall, the groups showed comparable levels of effectiveness. The possibility that both treatments relied on placebo mechanisms is discussed.

Dating anxiety is a pervasive clinical problem among college males (Arkowitz, Hinton, Perl and Himandi, 1978; Himandi, Arkowitz, Hinton and Perl, 1980; Perri, Kerzner and Taylor, 1981), and cognitive variables such as irrational beliefs have been implicated in both the origin and maintenance of this problem (e.g. Gormally, Sipps, Raphel, Edwin and Varvil-Weld, 1981; Haemmerlie and Montgomery, 1984; Twentyman, Boland and McFail, 1975). However, previous outcome studies on the effects of cognitive-behavioral treatment for this problem have not specifically controlled for placebo effects, with the exception of McGlynn, Bichajian, Giesen and Rose (1981). McGlynn et al. compared the effects of cue-controlled relaxation with placebo and no treatment controls, assessing the credibility of the placebo at post-treatment only. They found no differences between treatment and placebo groups on social effectiveness, heterosocial anxiety or heart rate, although the treatment group did show lower skin conductance during a conversation with a female confederate.

The scarcity of adequately controlled studies evaluating cognitive-behavioral treatment for the problem of dating anxiety makes it difficult to judge whether these treatments show empirical effects beyond those of an equally credible, but theoretically inert, control procedure. The present study evaluated the benefits of a cognitive-behavioral treatment for heterosocially anxious males using treatment and placebo rationales pretested for credibility equivalence. In addition, credibility was assessed throughout treatment.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were solicited through poster, newspaper and radio advertisements in a southwestern urban area. Advertisements sought males who felt uncomfortable with the opposite sex and wanted help for this problem. Twenty-two subjects initially volunteered to participate. Each completed a biographical inventory of previous relationships with females and was interviewed to assess general psycho-