Abstract
The proposed maladaptive function of safety behaviour use by anxious individuals plays an important role in cognitive-behavioural models of anxiety disorders. In this study, spider-fearful participants (N=126) either used or did not use safety gear during a brief behavioural experiment with a live spider and provided attributions for their fear change after the session. Our findings demonstrated that participants in both groups provided similar attributions for their fear change, with belief disconfirmation/new information being the most frequently reported attribution by both groups. Results are discussed in terms of cognitive-behavioural and exposure-based treatments and the role of safety behaviour in the treatment of anxiety disorders.

Introduction
According to cognitive-behavioural theories of anxiety disorders, safety behaviour (SB) prevents the acquisition of fear-disconfirming information because anxious individuals are likely to misattribute the non-occurrence of catastrophic outcomes in threatening situations to their use of SB (Salkovskis, 1991).

Research examining the impact of SB on fear and belief change in the context of cognitive-behavioural interventions has generated mixed findings (Rachman, Radomsky, & Shafran, 2008), with studies showing both detrimental (e.g., Sloan & Telch, 2002; Taylor & Alden, 2010) and facilitative (e.g., Deacon, Sy, Lickel, & Nelson, 2010; Milosevic & Radomsky, 2008) effects of SB.

No studies to date have directly examined participants’ attributions for change during treatment as a function of their SB use.

In the present study we investigated whether attributions for fear change following a brief behavioural experiment were affected by participants’ use of safety gear during the session.

Method

Measure of Fear Change Attributions
This self-report measure was developed for the current study. It asks participants to report the degree of their fear change along a 9-point Likert scale, and it includes an open-ended question assessing their reason(s) for this change in the case that they had experienced any.

Procedure
Baseline (no safety gear):
Fear of Spiders Questionnaire; BAT; SUDS at max distance

Safety gear group:
Selection of safety gear
20-min exposure to spider:
Info acquisition with safety gear

No safety gear group:
Not offered safety gear
Info acquisition without safety gear

Filler task – magazines (20 mins)

Post-1x (no safety gear):
Re-administration of baseline measures, Fear Change Attributions Measure

Fear Change Attributions: Analyses
Proportional attribution scores were calculated for each attribution response category and were subjected to one-way ANOVAs.

There were no significant differences between the groups for any of the eight categories (all F’s < 3.80, n.s.).

The most frequently reported fear change attribution by both groups was belief disconfirmation/new information. Fear change was attributed to use of safety gear by only 3 (4.8%) participants in the safety gear group.

Results

Fear Change Attributions: Coding
• Attributions were coded by two independent raters (Kappa=0.85) along 8 categories:
  o Belief disconfirmation/new information
  o Habituation
  o Increase in self-efficacy
  o Increase in perceived control
  o Laboratory (controlled) environment
  o Atypical spider
  o Safety gear
  o Experimenter’s presence

• A score of 1 was assigned in each category that was judged to reflect a participant’s attributional response; a score of 0 was assigned when a response was judged not to belong to a given category.

Discussion
This study demonstrated that participants who used and who did not use safety gear during a brief behavioural experiment experienced comparable levels of fear reduction and provided similar attributions for their fear change.

Contrary to cognitive-behavioural theories of anxiety disorders, the use of safety gear did not result in the misattribution of fear reduction to the gear; participants in both groups most frequently attributed their fear change to belief disconfirmation and information acquisition.

These findings suggest that it might be possible to incorporate the judicious use of SB into exposure-based interventions for anxiety disorders without impairing fear reduction and attributions for change.

Future studies on SB and change attributions should incorporate attribution measures with known psychometric properties, sample from clinically-anxious populations, and evaluate the longer-term impact of SB use with follow-up assessments.

References