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Exposure to Internal and External Stimuli: Reactions in Children of Patients With Panic Disorder or Animal Phobia

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Abstract — One aim of this study was to investigate whether children of parents with panic disorder (CPAN) ($n = 27$) respond with higher levels of anxiety to internal stimuli (caused by voluntary hyperventilation) than children of parents with animal phobia (CPHOB) ($n = 21$) or children of healthy control parents (CCON) ($n = 29$). To test the specificity of the hypothesis, the second aim was to assess whether CPHOB respond with higher increases in fear to an external (i.e., phobic) stimulus (spider) than both CPAN and CCON. Subjective anxiety and heart rate were assessed throughout the experiment. Contrary to expectation, all three groups of children reacted to hyperventilation with significant increases in subjective anxiety and heart rate. CPAN did not

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respond with stronger anxiety reactions than other children to hyperventilation, nor did they show higher increases in heart rate. However, more of the CPAN prematurely terminated the hyperventilation task. When children were not divided according to parental diagnoses, but rather with respect to their own initial level of reported fear of physical symptoms (anxiety sensitivity), those with higher levels of fear showed higher increases in subjective anxiety to the hyperventilation task. As for the spider confrontation, CPHOB reacted with significantly higher increases in subjective fear than both CPAN and CCON. *Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd*

Various studies have shown that children of parents with panic disorder suffer from anxiety disorders and other mental disorders more frequently than children of parents without mental disorders (Biederman et al., 1990; Silverman, Cerny, Nelles, & Burke, 1988; Sylvester, Hyde, & Reichler, 1987; Turner, Beidel, & Costello, 1987; Weissman, Leckman, Merikangas, Gammon, & Prusoff, 1984). In addition, as compared to control samples, more of these children apparently showed "behavioral inhibition." This means they had longer latency periods before interacting with unfamiliar persons, showed a lower rate of spontaneous verbal expression, and had a heightened physiological arousal when confronted with unknown situations (Rosenbaum et al., 1988). However, specificity of the above described characteristics is unclear: children of patients with other types of anxiety disorders (e.g., Silverman et al., 1988) as well as with depressive disorders (Sylvester et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1987; Weissman et al., 1984) are also at a higher risk for developing anxiety disorders and other mental disorders. Similarly, behavioral inhibition is found more often in children of patients with depressive disorders compared to the general population (Rosenbaum et al., 1988).

The aim of the present study was to examine whether children of panic patients in comparison to children of parents with animal phobia or controls show characteristics with particular significance for the development and maintenance of panic attacks or panic disorder. A second question was whether the children of patients with animal phobia react stronger than the other two groups to an external (phobic) stimulus.

Body Sensations and Their Association With Threat and Danger in Adult Panic Patients

Psychological models of panic disorder imply that panic attacks are evoked by the perception of internal stimuli (physical sensations or cognitions) and the association of these stimuli with an immediate danger to physical or psychological intactness (Clark, 1988; Ehlers & Margraf, 1989; Ehlers, Margraf, & Roth, 1988; Foa & Kozak, 1986; Margraf, Ehlers, & Roth, 1986). Such tendency of evaluating bodily sensations as signs of danger or illness and subsequently reacting anxiously has been conceptualized as anxiety sensitivity (Reiss & McNally, 1985). Anxiety sensitivity is considered to be influenced or maintained by various factors such as genetic disposition, learning experience (e.g. witnessing a heart attack in another person) as well as the personal experience of panic attacks.

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