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Memory Bias in Generalized Social Phobia: Remembering Negative Emotional Expressions

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Abstract—In two experiments, the authors examined memory for facial emotional expressions in patients with generalized social phobia (GSP) and in nonanxious control (NAC) participants. Three main questions were addressed. First, do patients with GSP differ from NAC participants in their overall memory for facial expressions? Second, do patients with GSP exhibit a memory bias for negative versus nonnegative expressions? Third, if such a bias exists, is it specific to angry expressions? The results of both experiments indicated that patients with GSP have better memory for all facial expressions than do NAC participants. Results of experiment 2 suggest that patients with GSP exhibit enhanced recognition for negative compared with nonnegative expressions; in contrast, NAC participants did not exhibit such enhancement. Results concerning specificity were equivocal. The importance of examining cognitive biases in patients with GSP via the use of facial expression is discussed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Generalized social phobia; Memory bias; Facial expressions

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Socially anxious individuals show attention, interpretation, and evaluation biases to socially relevant information (e.g., Amir, Foa, & Coles, 1988; Butler & Mathews, 1983, 1987; Foa, Franklin, Perry, & Herbert, 1996; Gilboa-Schechtman, Franklin, & Foa, 2000; Hope, Rapee, Heimberg, & Dombek, 1990; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988; Mattia, Heimberg, & Hope, 1993). The findings concerning memory biases in social anxiety are less conclusive. Although some studies have found enhanced memory for negative or threat-relevant information, others did not. For example, Claeys (1989) reported better recall for negative self-descriptive adjectives in a depth-of-processing task in highly socially anxious individuals compared with individuals with low social anxiety. In contrast, in a series of four studies using a variety of memory tasks and stimulus types, Rapee, McCallum, Melville, Ravenscroft, and Rodney (1993) failed to identify memory biases for negatively valenced stimuli in individuals with social phobia (SP).

With the exception of one study (Lundh & Ost, 1996), investigations of memory bias in persons with SP used verbal stimuli. Recently, researchers have noted the advantage of using more ecologically valid stimuli in studying cognitive biases in persons with SP (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Lundh & Ost, 1996; Bradley, Mogg, Millar, Bonham-Carter, Fergusson, Jenkins, & Parr, 1997). Facial expressions of emotions seem particularly well suited for this purpose. First, these stimuli are ubiquitous, biologically significant, and their meaning is context free (Hansen & Hansen, 1994; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Bradley, Mogg, Millar, Bonham-Carter, Fergusson, Jenkins, & Parr, 1997). Second, facial expressions of emotions constitute the actual cues to which persons with SP seem to be particularly attuned, whereas words constitute only indirect representations of these cues. Third, social evaluations are often expressed only nonverbally. Because persons with SP tend to be excessively preoccupied with such evaluations, biases in the information processing of facial expressions may play an important role in the maintenance of SP.

To assess recognition memory for facial expressions, Lundh and Ost (1996) presented 20 photographs to persons with SP and to control participants, asking them to state whether the person in the photograph was "generally critical towards others . . . or generally accepting and tolerant . . ." (p. 789). After a distracter task, participants were presented with 20 photographs of individuals encountered in the initial task and 60 distracter photographs. Participants were asked to identify the faces they had seen in the initial task. Persons with SP recognized more faces they had rated as "critical" than faces they had rated as "accepting," whereas control participants exhibited the opposite pattern. Although these results are interesting, the design of the study made it impossible to determine whether a response bias or a memory bias underlies the preference of those with SP for critical faces. If the results were the result of a response bias, we would expect persons with SP to designate critical faces as

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