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Cognitive processes in social anxiety: the effects of self-focus, rumination and anticipatory processing

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Abstract

We examined three cognitive processes hypothesized to contribute to biases in judgments about and memory for social events: self-focused attention, post-event rumination, and anticipatory processing. Socially anxious ($N = 58$) and nonanxious ($N = 58$) subjects participated in a social interaction and then completed measures of self-focused attention and anxiety-related physiological sensations and behavior. The next day, subjects completed measures that assessed frequency of post-event processing and recall of the interaction. The results indicated that selective attention to negative self-related information led to biases in social judgments and recollections and that post-event processing contributed to the recall of negative self-related information. No evidence was found for selective retrieval of negative self-related information prior to a second social interaction. The results reconcile inconsistent previous findings related to memory bias in social anxiety. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Cognitive; Memory; Attention; Social anxiety; Rumination; Self-focus

1. Introduction

Cognitive theories of social phobia are based on the general concept of biased processing of social information (e.g., Beck & Emery, 1985; Clark & Wells, 1995). Such models have three central tenets: (a) that patients with social phobia selectively attend to negative information about social situations; (b) that this leads to biases in their judgments and recollections of social events and (c) that these biases exacerbate and perpetuate social fears. Although there is

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growing empirical support for this approach, several key features of the cognitive perspective remain to be confirmed, particularly in regards to the existence of memory bias and the identification of the specific cognitive operations that contribute to cognitive distortions.

Clark & Wells, (1995) provided a detailed description of the way in which biased processing is believed to occur. According to these writers, in social situations, social phobics focus on monitoring themselves, particularly their anxiety-related internal sensations, thoughts and behaviors. Self-focused attention increases the salience of this negative self-related information at the expense of external information about the social situation. This not only exacerbates anxiety, but leads to negative biases in the person's social judgments both during and after the situation, particularly about the person's own performance. The adoption of safety behaviors contributes to this process by increasing anxiety and self-focused attention and preventing the disconfirmation of negative beliefs. Following social situations, social phobics engage in post-event processing in which they review the interaction in detail. According to Clark and Wells, (1995), this postmortem rumination is likely to center on anxious feelings and negative self-perceptions because they "were processed in detail... and hence were strongly encoded in memory" (Clark & Wells, 1995, p. 74). The end result of this is that the person recalls the interaction as more negative than it really was. Prior to subsequent social events, the social phobic engages in anticipatory processing in which their thoughts "tend to be dominated by recollections of past failures" and predictions of poor performance and thus, the cycle begins again.

One unique feature of this model is the delineation of several distinct cognitive operations, most notably self-focused attention and anticipatory and post-event processing, that are proposed to contribute to social anxiety. Self-focused attention occurs during social events and highlights specific types of information. Post-event rumination occurs between social events and reactivates memory traces, which results in deeper processing of the information recalled. Anticipatory processing occurs prior to social events and evokes the negative memories and predictions that begin the anxious cycle. Thus, all three operations contribute to biased processing of social information and hence social anxiety, although at different points in time and in different ways.

Some aspects of this model have empirical support. Research has demonstrated that social scrutiny increases self-focused attention in socially anxious and social phobic individuals (e.g., Buss, 1980; Alden, Teshuck & Tee, 1992; Woody, 1996) and it is well established that self-focused attention heightens awareness of negative emotional states (e.g., Buss, 1980). Similarly, socially anxious and social phobic individuals are known to display negative biases in their self and social judgments (e.g., McEwan & Devins, 1983; Lucock & Salkovskis, 1988; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993; Alden & Wallace, 1995). However, the extent to which biased social judgments are due to self-focused attention, rather than other factors such as a general negative response set or the other cognitive operations identified by Clark and Wells, has yet to be established. If judgmental biases arise as a result of self-focused attention, one would expect individuals who display more extensive self-directed attention to display greater distortions in their social judgments.

Another unanswered question is whether self-focused attention leads to biases in memory for the social event. Although judgment and memory are clearly interrelated, they are not identical processes. For example, one may remember many pieces of information about a social event,

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