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Priming panic interpretations in children of patients with panic disorder

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Abstract

Cognitive and psycho-physiological models of panic disorder stress the role of interpretation bias in the maintenance of the disorder. Several studies have reported results consistent with this hypothesis, but it is still unclear whether this bias precedes panic disorder or is a consequence of it. In the present study, we compared the interpretations of ambiguous scenarios of children of individuals with panic disorder, children of individuals with animal phobia, and children of healthy controls. Children were presented with three types of scenarios each including one of the following descriptions: panic-relevant physical sensations, animal-relevant stimuli, and panic-irrelevant physical sensations (i.e., cold symptoms). To test, if children's interpretation bias is affected by priming, we compared their responses to the scenarios before and after watching a panic, a spider phobic, and a cold model. The results revealed that (a) children of panic disordered parents but not of parents with animal phobia and of healthy controls showed a significant increase in anxious interpretations after priming; and (b) this significant increase emerged only after priming through presentation of a panic-relevant model and not after priming through presentation of a phobia-relevant or cold-relevant model. Because the children of panic disordered parents did not have panics themselves, their increase in panic interpretations can be

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viewed as a vulnerability factor. Longitudinal studies should clarify the role of interpretation style in the etiology of panic disorder.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades many clinical researchers have been interested in elucidating the cognitive processes underlying anxiety (cf., Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews, 1997). Indeed, influential psychological models of anxiety disorders have postulated that cognitive processes are crucial for the maintenance of these disorders (e.g., Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985; Foa & Kozak, 1986) and several studies have supported this premise. In particular, three kinds of cognitive biases, which were found to differentiate anxiety disordered individuals from nonanxious controls, have been hypothesized to mediate the maintenance of anxiety disorders: attentional bias (e.g., Foa, Ilai, McCarthy, Shoyer, & Murdock, 1993; Hope, Rapee, Heimberg, & Dombeck, 1990), memory bias (e.g., Becker, Roth, Andrich, & Margraf, 1999; McNally, Litz, & Prassas, 1994), and interpretation bias (e.g., Butler & Mathews, 1983; McNally & Foa, 1987).

Cognitive and psycho-physiological models of panic disorder have emphasized the role of interpretation bias in the maintenance of this disorder (Beck et al., 1985; Clark, 1986; Ehlers & Margraf, 1989; Margraf & Ehlers, 1989). Specifically, these models postulate that individuals with panic disorder interpret body sensations associated with panic as threatening, and that this interpretation, in turn, gives rise to panic attacks, thus maintaining the disorder. Other authors conceptualized this feature as “fear of fear” (Goldstein & Chambless, 1978) or “anxiety sensitivity” (Reiss & McNally, 1985). Several studies examined the presence of an interpretation bias in panic disordered patients. McNally and Foa (1987) adopted a questionnaire originally developed by Butler and Mathews (1983), which consisted of ambiguous scenarios half of which included panic-relevant stimuli and the other half, panic-irrelevant potentially threatening stimuli. Untreated individuals with agoraphobia showed more catastrophic interpretations of panic-relevant stimuli than healthy controls and patients whose agoraphobia was successfully treated. Using McNally and Foa’s (1987) questionnaire, Harvey, Richards, Dziadosz, and Swindell (1993) compared interpretations of individuals with panic disorder to individuals with social phobia and to healthy controls. The results were consistent with those of McNally and Foa. Panic disordered individuals, with and without agoraphobia, exhibited a bias towards catastrophic interpretation of panic-relevant stimuli more than individuals

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