



Explicit and implicit memory, trait anxiety, and repressive coping style

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Abstract

Individuals with high trait anxiety, low trait anxiety, and repressive coping style were compared on explicit and implicit memory for physical threat words, social threat words, positive words, and neutral words. The results replicate earlier findings to the effect that bias indexes correlate within memory type (implicit and explicit memory, respectively) but not within word category across memory type, suggesting that explicit and implicit memory bias represent two separate forms of emotional processing. Neither explicit nor implicit memory bias, however, was found to be associated with trait anxiety, or with repressive coping style—although an earlier finding of a negative association between anger/irritability and implicit memory bias was partly replicated. On the other hand, repressive coping style was found to be more associated with explicit than implicit memory performance in general (i.e. independently of the valence of words), which suggests the hypothesis that repressors, as compared with high and low trait-anxious individuals, have a general tendency to process information more at an explicit than an implicit level. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Most research on individual differences in emotional functioning rely on self-assessment scales. During the last decade, however, an increasing number of studies have focused on cognitive processing of emotional information by means of laboratory tasks like the emotional Stroop task (e.g. Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996) and tests of explicit and implicit memory bias for emotional information (Eysenck, 1997). An interesting question is to what extent these kinds of tasks can be used as reliable measures of individual differences in cognitive styles of information processing, and how these kinds of measures are related to self-report measures of emotion. The

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present study addresses the question whether explicit and implicit memory bias for emotional information represent different styles of emotional processing, and if these styles are associated with trait anxiety and repressive coping style.

1.1. Explicit and implicit memory bias as two separate kinds of emotional processing

In two earlier studies on explicit and implicit memory bias in clinical samples (Lundh, Czyzykow, & Öst, 1997; Lundh & Öst, 1997), a systematic pattern of correlations was found to the effect that indexes of memory bias (for physical threat words, social threat words, and positive words) correlated *within memory type* (i.e. explicit and implicit memory, respectively), but *not within word category* (i.e. positive words, physical threat words, and social threat words) across memory type. This suggests not only that explicit and implicit memory bias represent two different kinds of processes, but also: (1) that individuals differ consistently in these two kinds of memory bias; and (2) that the processes we are dealing with here may more aptly be referred to as implicit and explicit memory bias for *emotional* — and not merely *negative* — information. Lundh et al. (1997) therefore suggested that explicit and implicit memory bias for emotional information may represent two different styles of emotional processing. The main purpose of the present study was to see if these results could be replicated in a non-clinical sample, and to study if these two kinds of emotional memory bias are associated with trait anxiety and repressive coping style.

1.2. Explicit and implicit memory bias and trait anxiety

According to cognitive models of emotion (e.g. Beck, 1976; Bower, 1981; Eysenck, 1997; Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews, 1988), trait anxiety is associated with a number of cognitive biases for threat-related information. Although trait anxiety has been reliably associated with an attentional and interpretive bias for threat-related information, however, the evidence of an association between trait anxiety and memory bias is much less consistent (Eysenck & Byrne, 1994; Nugent & Mineka, 1994; Reidy & Richards, 1997; Richards & French, 1991; Richards & Millwood, 1989).

A possible explanation of this relative absence of evidence of an anxiety-related explicit memory bias for threat-related information was put forward by Williams et al. (1988), who suggested that anxiety is associated with bias effects primarily on implicit memory tasks that rely on automatic priming processes, as distinct from explicit memory tasks that rely on more conscious elaboration processes. On explicit memory tasks, the subject is asked for his or her conscious recall or recognition of information presented during the encoding stage of the experiment. On implicit memory tasks, on the other hand, the subject is not asked to retrieve this information, but is given a task that will show retention of this material more indirectly. Implicit memory is assumed to be the result of automatic priming processes which are not dependent on conscious awareness and elaboration. A number of studies have tested the prediction that trait anxiety is associated with an implicit memory bias for threat-related information. Again, however, the studies that have compared groups of individuals with high and low trait anxiety have produced inconsistent results. Whereas some studies (Eysenck & Byrne, 1994; Richards & French, 1991) have found evidence of an implicit memory bias among high trait anxious individuals, others have failed to find any such evidence (Nugent & Mineka, 1994; Richards, French, Adams, Eldridge, & Papadopoulou, 1999; Russo, Fox, & Bowles, 1999).

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