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Mindsets in social anxiety: a new look at selective information processing

Anette Hiemisch^a, Anke Ehlers^{b,*}, Rainer Westermann^a

^a *Department of Psychology, University of Greifswald, Germany*

^b *Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, London SE5 8AF, UK*

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Abstract

According to the Rubicon Model of Action Phases (in: J. Gollwitzer, 1996), Motivation, volition, and action, *Encyclopedia of psychology*, series “motivation and emotion”, Vol. 4, Hogrefe, Göttingen, 1996, pp. 531–582), different stages in goal pursuit are accompanied by different mindsets that enhance processing of mindset-congruous information. Before people engage in action, they usually deliberate possible goals for a given situation (deliberative mindset). Once a goal is chosen, they plan how to achieve this particular goal (implemental mindset). The present experiments tested the hypothesis that people with social anxiety show a reversal of mindsets when approaching social situations. In Experiment 1, 20 students were asked to either deliberate goals for a hypothetical social conflict (deliberation), or to think about steps to solve the conflict (implementation). An unexpected recognition test demonstrated different recognition memory for deliberation-related versus implementation-related information in the two groups, consistent with the hypothesis of different mindsets. In Experiment 2, 48 students who were either high or low in social anxiety were randomly assigned to either the deliberation or the implementation condition. Participants high in social anxiety showed a pattern in the recognition test that was consistent with a reversal of mindsets. When asked to plan social situations, they showed an inappropriate deliberative mindset. In contrast, they lacked a deliberative mindset when deliberating goals for the social situation. The result indicate that socially anxious people engage in information processing that interferes with successful goal attainment when approaching social situations. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social anxiety; Goals; Information processing; Action theory; Fear of negative evaluation

*Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, London SE5 8AF, UK. Tel.: +44-20-7848-5033; fax: +44-20-7848-0591.

E-mail address: a.ehlers@iop.kcl.ac.uk (A. Ehlers).

Recent models of social phobia assume that biases in information processing play a major role in the maintenance of the disorder (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Hartman, 1983; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). In line with these cognitive models, research has shown that social phobics interpret social events in an excessively negative fashion (for a review see Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001), and that they show enhanced self-focused attention when anxious, as well as reduced processing of external social cues (Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, & Chen, 1999; Chen, Ehlers, Clark, & Mansell, 2002). Their (reduced) processing of external social cues is biased in favour of detection and recall of cues that could be interpreted as signs of disapproval from others (Gilboa-Schechtman, Foa, & Amir, 1999; Veljaca & Rapee, 1998). All of these information processing biases contribute to the patients' impression that they come across badly in social interactions, and thus increase their anxiety.

Leary and colleagues (Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1995) have pointed out that the impression that one comes across badly in social situations does not necessarily lead to anxiety. Social anxiety only occurs if individuals do not feel able to attain their goals in a social situation. Several models of social phobia have stated that anxiety is triggered when social phobics wish to convey a favourable impression on others but are markedly insecure about their ability to do so (e.g., Clark & Wells, 1995; Trower & Gilbert, 1989). Thus, it appears that the goals people set themselves in social situations are crucial for understanding social anxiety. They may determine how information is processed in social situations.

Although the effects of goal-setting on information processing have been well researched in experimental psychology under the umbrella of action theory research (e.g., Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996), this approach has not yet been applied to social anxiety. While cognitive models focus on selective attention for threat-related information and the consequences for the judgment and recollection of social situations (e.g. Mellings & Alden, 2000), action theory emphasizes cognitive processes relevant for successful goal attainment. The goal one is trying to achieve not only defines the demands one has to meet within the course of action, but it also influences cognition, affect and behaviour in a specific way.

The aim of the present study was to investigate how goal setting in social anxiety affects self-regulation in feared social situations, focusing on its impact on information processing. The research methods were derived from the Rubicon Model of Action Phases (Gollwitzer, 1991, 1996; Heckhausen, 1991) that describes the consequences of goal setting on information processing within the course of action.

The Rubicon Model distinguishes four action phases during goal pursuit. First, in the *predecisional* phase, people deliberate what potential goals and finally choose one as the basis for future action (intention formation). Second, in the *preactional* phase they form a plan for how to achieve the intention in the given situation. Third, in the *actional* phase, the plan is put into action. Fourth, in the *postactional* phase, the outcomes of the actions are evaluated.

Each of the four phases is accompanied by specific mindsets that facilitate the processing of certain types of information and are thought to facilitate successful

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