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Acta Psychologica 114 (2003) 1–15

**acta
psychologica**

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Identity and expression memory for happy and angry faces in social anxiety

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Received 1 November 2002; accepted 15 April 2003

Abstract

We examined the influence of social anxiety on memory for both identity and emotional expressions of unfamiliar faces. Participants high and low in social anxiety were presented with happy and angry faces and were later asked to recognise the same faces displaying a neutral expression. They also had to remember what the initial expressions of the faces had been. Remember/know/guess judgements were asked both for identity and expression memory. For participants low in social anxiety, both identity and expression memory were more often associated with “remember” responses when the faces were previously seen with a happy rather than an angry expression. In contrast, the initial expression of the faces did not affect either identity or expression memory for participants high in social anxiety. We interpreted these findings by arguing that most people tend to preferentially elaborate positive rather than negative social stimuli that are important to the self and that this tendency may be reduced in high socially anxious individuals because of the negative meaning they tend to ascribe to positive social information.

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PsycINFO classification: 2360; 3215

Keywords: Social anxiety; Memory; Face perception; Facial expressions

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1. Introduction

Cognitive theories of social phobia are based on the idea that differences in how individuals process social/evaluative information may be causal in the development or maintenance of the disorder (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Accordingly, researchers have investigated whether social phobics and non-clinical individuals high in social anxiety show biases towards processing socially threatening information at several levels within the information-processing system. The literature clearly indicates that social phobia is associated with an attentional bias towards socially threatening words and an interpretational bias towards self-relevant social information (see Eysenck, 1999; Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001; Musa & Lépine, 2000 for reviews). On the other hand, the existence of a memory bias has received mixed support in research. Several studies have failed to find an explicit memory bias both in social phobics (Cloitre, Cancienne, Heimberg, Holt, & Liebowitz, 1995; Lundh & Öst, 1997; Rapee, McCallum, Melville, Ravenscroft, & Rodney, 1994) and in non-clinical individuals high in social anxiety (Foa, McNally, & Murdock, 1989; Sanz, 1996). In contrast, other studies have found that non-clinical individuals high in social anxiety tend to recall more negative words than individuals low in social anxiety (Breck & Smith, 1983; O'Banion & Arkowitz, 1977). Finally, Mansell and Clark (1999) found that non-clinical individuals high in social anxiety tended to recall less positive adjectives than individuals low in social anxiety but only when information was encoded in reference to their public self and when they were anticipating a social evaluation. However, high and low socially anxious participants were not significantly different with regard to recall of negative adjectives. When considering these divergent results, a recent review of information processing in social phobia concludes that '... the literature reports little evidence to suggest that social phobia is associated with a memory bias' (Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001, p. 763).

The majority of studies have used verbal stimuli in order to investigate memory bias in social anxiety and this may be problematic for several reasons. First, it has been argued that words are only indirect representations of threat and that studies should try to use more ecologically valid stimuli like facial expressions connoting approval or disapproval because these stimuli are directly related to social evaluations (Mogg & Bradley, 1999). Second, Clark and Wells (1995) argued that word-processing studies are modelling attention to mental preoccupations rather than attention to actual social cues, whereas the reverse is true for studies that used more ecological stimuli like faces. Taking these reflections into account, it might be more appropriate to use faces as stimuli if one wants to investigate potential memory biases in social anxiety. The human face is a highly significant social stimulus which provides various information that can be used to recognise familiar people and also to infer people's age, gender, or emotional state (Bruce & Young, 1986). Among all these information, information about face identity and emotional expressions are probably the most salient and important aspects of non-verbal communication in social situations. Accordingly, memory for these two kinds of information might be especially interesting to study in social anxiety.

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