



Encoding processes in social anxiety[☆]

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Abstract

According to current theories, memory processes play an important role in the maintenance of social fears. However, the empirical evidence regarding memory processes in social anxiety is controversial, and little is known about specific memory processes, such as encoding. The present study employs a release from proactive interference (RPI) technique to explore encoding-related processes in social anxiety. Eighty-four high and low socially anxious college students participated in the RPI task. The main hypothesis was that RPI effects that involve socially threatening words are greater in high than in low socially anxious subjects. Contrary to this hypothesis, however, greater RPI effects were found in low rather than in high socially anxious subjects if a social threat dimension was encoded. This suggests that low socially anxious individuals show more specific encoding strategies of threatening information than high socially anxious individuals.

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1. Encoding processes in social anxiety

Several cognitive models assume that anxious individuals process information in a biased manner (e.g., Beck & Clark, 1997). Two reviews specifically focusing on social

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anxiety and social phobia (Amir & Foa, 2001; Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001) concluded that there is some (but mixed) support for the idea that high socially anxious students show an explicit memory bias for socially threatening words, while there is little persuasive evidence that such memory biases favoring recall of lexical socially threatening cues occur in individuals with social phobia. One reason for this conflicting evidence may be how participants are selected for participation in these studies; often individuals with high social anxiety are defined as students yielding high scores on social anxiety measures. However, in order to clarify differences and similarities among social anxiety and its clinical expression, social phobia, it may be necessary to separate moderate-to-high socially anxious individuals from those who also meet criteria for social phobia. For memory biases found in high socially anxious students, this differentiation has rarely been made, in contrast to studies with social phobia. In addition, a variety of other questions remain regarding high socially anxious samples. For example, it is still unclear whether the bias is related to attentional, encoding, or retrieval processes. The present study focuses on encoding processes. We distinguish between attention and encoding for several reasons (Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001): Attention determines the quality and quantity of encoding; however, encoding is also a “top-down process” in which already existing memory organization impacts upon encoding processes. Therefore, encoding processes mediate between attentional and memory processes. Looking specifically at encoding may add to our knowledge about the presence (or absence) of a memory bias among individuals with a high level of social anxiety who are not at a clinical stage of social phobia. In addition, a well-known cognitive model of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995) provides another rationale for focusing on encoding processes. The authors proposed that information about social threat was particularly well encoded in an individual’s memory due to repeated processing of anxious feelings and negative self-perception prior to, during, and after social situations (Clark & Wells, 1995). As such, information about social threat should also be particularly well retrieved.

However, not all theories predict such a bias. Russo, Fox, Bellinger, and Nguyen-Van-Tan (2001) pointed out that while Beck et al.’s model of anxiety (Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985) states that an activated anxiety-related schema should result in better encoding of threat-related information, other models of information processing (Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews, 1997) predict the absence of such a mood-congruent explicit memory bias due to less elaborative encoding of threat in anxiety. Coles and Heimberg (2002) reviewed the data and concluded that evidence for an explicit memory bias was rare in social phobia. Despite these empirical observations, Russo et al. (2001) outline in detail that from a theoretical point of view, an explicit memory bias should be observable in anxiety. They argue that in the majority of studies in which high-trait anxiety individuals or generalized anxiety disorder patients were tested, tasks were used that promote some form of deep semantic encoding (e.g., self-referred tasks or liking orienting task). Tasks that promote deep semantic encoding, however, leave little room for emotional factors to impact recall because efficient encoding is facilitated under such conditions. Russo et al. consequently suggest that a detection of an explicit memory bias may be more

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