



Is post-event processing specific for social anxiety?

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Received 20 January 2005; received in revised form 3 January 2006; accepted 9 February 2006

Abstract

In their model of social phobia, Clark and Wells [1995. A cognitive model of social phobia. In R. G. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D. A. Hope & F. Schneier (Eds.), *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment, and treatment* (pp. 69–93). New York, London: The Guilford Press] introduced a process called “post-event processing” (PEP), which is characterized by prolonged rumination about past social situations. The present study examined to what extent PEP is specific for (a) social anxiety or (b) social situations. In a cross-sectional study, 217 participants reported about a social and a phobic event followed by negative thinking. PEP as well as its potential predictors such as social anxiety, general anxiety, and depression were measured by questionnaires. Results showed that social events were followed more often and by more intense PEP. Further confirming specificity, the fear of negative evaluation as an aspect of social anxiety was significantly associated with PEP for social but not for phobic situations, and vice versa; general anxiety predicted PEP only after phobic but not after social situations. Furthermore, PEP was elevated particularly for interaction (as opposed to performance) situations, indicating that the ambiguity of the situation may be an important predictor for prolonged processing.

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Keywords: Social phobia; Anxiety; Rumination; Cognitive processes; Post-event processing

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1. Introduction

Social phobia is one of the most frequent anxiety disorders, and subthreshold expressions of social anxiety are a part of many individuals' lives (Fehm, Pélissolo, Furmark, & Wittchen, 2005; Wittchen & Fehm, 2003). Innovative models explaining the development and maintenance of the disorder have been proposed, some of which favor a cognitive view, namely those by Rapee and Heimberg (1997) and Clark and Wells (1995). Whereas processes within the situation are similarly delineated in both models, only the model by Clark and Wells explicitly postulates biased cognitive processes before as well as after the situation. The latter has been named "post-event processing" (PEP) or "post-mortem thinking" (Clark & Wells, 1995, p. 85). PEP includes repetitive, detailed reviews of the situation and an increased focus on the negative aspects of the situation. Negative self-perceptions and recollections of unfavorable aspects of the situation are likely to occur more and more frequently, as well as recollections of similar situations that are perceived as a failure. These processes may be so strong that a situation originally judged as satisfactory might be evaluated as a complete flop later on. In recent works, the term post-event rumination has been introduced (Abbott & Rapee, 2004; Edwards, Rapee, & Franklin, 2003), but as PEP also includes cognitive processes other than rumination (e.g., biased memory retrieval) we will adhere to the term "post-event processing" in this article.

Post-event processes are of particular interest for the cognitive view of social phobia as they might contribute to the explanation why people with social anxiety do not experience a reduction of anxiety during repeated exposure to social situations, although they are part of everyday life. As the actual course of a situation is replaced by an increasingly distorted view of this situation, any corrective information will be less influential in comparison with the negative information subjectively fitting well with the person's negative self-image. Furthermore, PEP may partially account for anticipatory anxiety, which occurs often and intensely in advance of social situations. In spite of the prominent role that retrospective negative evaluations of the self in social situations may have for the understanding of the development and maintenance of social anxiety, systematic research on PEP only begins to emerge.

Studies empirically addressing PEP demonstrated that PEP can be measured with high internal consistency (Edwards et al., 2003; Lundh & Sperling, 2002; Rachman, Grüter-Andrew, & Shafran, 2000), high stability (Lundh & Sperling, 2002), and high factorial validity (Rachman et al., 2000) when questionnaire measures are used. Especially the relation between social anxiety and PEP has been explored. In several studies, significantly higher levels of PEP for high compared to low socially anxious individuals have been reported (Edwards et al., 2003; Mellings & Alden, 2000; Rachman et al., 2000). Similar results were found among patients with social phobia (Abbott & Rapee, 2004). Scores for social anxiety and PEP were significantly positively correlated ($r = .40$ in Rachman et al., 2000; $.45 < r < .66$ for different measures of social anxiety in Edwards et al., 2003). Note that Rachman and colleagues instructed their participants to remember "a social situation ... during the past few months" (Rachman et al., 2000, p. 613) but did not control whether those recollections were definitely characterized by negative evaluation or rather by other negative emotions in social situations such as guilt or anger. According to Lundh and Sperling (2002), a number of emotions other than evaluative anxiety are prompted by social situations, which could explain the smaller correlations than those found by Edwards et al. (2003).

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