

Post-event processing in social anxiety

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Abstract

Clark and Wells' [1995. A cognitive model of social phobia. In: R. Heimberg, M. Liebowitz, D.A. Hope, & F.R. Schneier (Eds.) *Social phobia: Diagnosis, assessment and treatment* (pp. 69–93). New York: Guildford Press.] cognitive model of social phobia proposes that following a social event, individuals with social phobia will engage in post-event processing, during which they conduct a detailed review of the event. This study investigated the relationship between self-appraisals of performance and post-event processing in individuals high and low in social anxiety. Participants appraised their performance immediately after a conversation with an unknown individual and prior to an anticipated second conversation task 1 week later. The frequency and valence of post-event processing during the week following the conversation was also assessed. The study also explored differences in the metacognitive processes of high and low socially anxious participants. The high socially anxious group experienced more anxiety, predicted worse performance, underestimated their actual performance, and engaged in more post-event processing than low socially anxious participants. The degree of negative post-event processing was linked to the extent of social anxiety and negative appraisals of performance, both immediately after the conversation task and 1 week later. Differences were also observed in some metacognitive processes. The results are discussed in relation to current theory and previous research.

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Introduction

Social phobia is a common and disabling anxiety disorder (Harvey, Clark, Ehlers, & Rapee, 2000), characterised by an intense concern about evoking negative reactions from others during social interactions (Stravynski, Bond, & Amado, 2004). According to recent theoretical models of social phobia, individuals with social phobia attach fundamental importance to being positively appraised by others, yet experience marked insecurity regarding their ability to convey a favourable impression of themselves to others. As a consequence, individuals with social phobia believe that their social behaviour will have disastrous consequences, such as humiliation or rejection (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

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The Clark and Wells (1995) model of social phobia identifies four processes that contribute to the maintenance of this anxiety: self-schemata, self-focused attention, in-situation safety behaviours, and anticipatory and post-event processing. This study focuses on one part of the fourth maintaining factor, post-event processing. According to the Clark and Wells model, post-event processing refers to the tendency for individuals with social phobia to engage in a detailed review or 'post-mortem' of events following a social interaction. Clark and Wells (1995) argue that the cognitive content and associated affect of post-event processing is guided by the thoughts and feelings that were processed during the event itself. During post-event processing, individuals with social phobia typically become preoccupied with anxious feelings and negative self-perceptions, and ambiguous information is re-interpreted as negative (Stopa & Clark, 2000), leading to greater levels of anxiety and shame (Clark & Wells, 1995). Clark and Wells' (1995) conceptualisation of post-event processing is therefore similar to Rapee and Heimberg's (1997) suggestion that retrospective rumination generates and maintains social anxiety. According to Rapee and Heimberg (1997), retrospective rumination is characterised by information elicited from external and internal cues during the social event itself, together with the recollection of perceived past failures. Similar to Clark and Wells' (1995) model, retrospective rumination is hypothesised to perpetuate maladaptive cognitions and lower anticipation for success in future social interactions.

A number of studies provide support for Clark and Wells' (1995) account of post-event processing in that following a social situation, highly socially anxious individuals engage in significantly more negative post-event processing about their performance compared to individuals low in social anxiety (Edwards, Rapee, & Franklin, 2003; Mellings & Alden, 2000). Research into the characteristics and consequences of post-event processing has shown that following a social situation, the degree of state anxiety experienced during the situation and levels of trait anxiety are strongly correlated with the degree of self-reported post-event rumination (Abbott & Rapee, 2002; Lundh & Sperling, 2002; Rachman, Gruter-Andrew, & Shafran, 2000). Rachman et al. (2000) describe the content of the ruminative thoughts following a social event as recurrent and intrusive, and argue that they interfere with the individual's ability to concentrate, presumably by capturing and maintaining the focus of attention.

The Clark and Wells (1995) model predicts a specific relationship between self-appraisal of performance in social situations and the frequency and valence of subsequent post-event processing. That is, the more negatively one perceives one's performance, the greater the frequency of negative post-event processing. Although empirical research has demonstrated that socially anxious individuals underestimate their performance and overestimate the appearance of negative behaviours relative to individuals with low social anxiety and independent observers (Mellings & Alden, 2000; Rapee & Lim, 1992; Stopa & Clark, 1993), few studies have directly investigated the relationship between subjective appraisals of performance and post-event processing in social anxiety and social phobia. One study that did investigate this relationship asked participants to perform an impromptu speech task (Abbott & Rapee, 2004). Abbott and Rapee (2004) showed that individuals with social phobia engaged in more negative rumination than controls, with the best predictors of post-event rumination being social anxiety symptom severity and self-appraisals of performance. Abbott and Rapee (2004) also demonstrated that individuals with social phobia maintain negative appraisals of performance, contrasting with the non-clinical group who became more positive about their performance over time.

There is limited research into the mechanisms underlying post-event processing. Recent accounts propose that metacognitive beliefs and appraisals may play a role in maintaining recurrent negative thinking (Watkins, 2004; Watkins & Baracaia, 2001). Metacognition refers to the psychological structures, knowledge, events and processes that are involved in the control, modification and interpretation of thinking itself (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2004), and is thought to be an important factor in the development and maintenance of psychological disorder (Wells, 2000). More specifically, individuals have positive and negative beliefs about thinking that influences appraisals. Individuals also have implicit procedural metacognitions that form plans or programmes for guiding cognition and action. Research into rumination in depression has demonstrated that individuals who ruminate often believe that it increases insight into the self in order to improve problem solving and reduce the potential for repeating mistakes in the future (Watkins, 2004; Watkins & Baracaia, 2001). These metacognitive processes may be similarly important in post-event processing. Research by both Rachman et al. (2000) and Field and Morgan (2004) reported that individuals with high social anxiety may

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