



Images of the self in social anxiety: Effects on the retrieval of autobiographical memories

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Abstract

Cognitive models of social phobia propose that negative self-images play an important role in maintaining anxiety. This study examines the effect of holding a positive or a negative image in mind during a speech on the retrieval of autobiographical memories. Twenty high socially anxious participants performed a standard autobiographical memory task (AMT), which used positive, negative and neutral cue words. Participants performed the AMT twice: once after giving a speech holding a positive image and once while holding a negative image. Participants were more anxious and rated their performance worse in the negative image condition. Negative memories were retrieved faster in the negative image condition and positive memories were retrieved faster in the positive image condition. In the negative image condition, positive memories were retrieved more slowly than either negative or neutral memories. Inhibition and facilitation are proposed as two processes that could explain the effects of differently valenced imagery on autobiographical memory. The clear evidence for an inhibitory effect on positive autobiographical memories in the negative imagery condition is considered in relation to Brewin's [(2006). Understanding cognitive behaviour therapy: A retrieval competition account. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44, 765–784] retrieval competition hypothesis. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the potential role of inhibition in imagery rescripting.

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1. Introduction

In the current cognitive models of social phobia, images of the self play an important role in maintaining social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) and recent evidence suggests that these images could also play a causal role in the development of social anxiety (Hirsch, Matthews, Clark, Williams, & Morrison, 2006). The self-images of socially phobic individuals are frequently negative and distorted, and yet the individuals believe that they are accurate representations. The effects of this mental bias are pervasive and socially phobic individuals rate their appearance and attractiveness worse compared to observers, as well as underestimating their social and performance skills (e.g. see Rapee & Abbott, 2006).

Preliminary evidence (Wild, Hackmann, & Clark, *in press a, b*) suggests that imagery rescripting is a useful technique in therapy for social phobia. Wild et al. (*in press b*), for example, used a single session of imagery rescripting with a group of 20 patients with social phobia and demonstrated that rescripting can significantly decrease distress in response to the image, modify the beliefs about the self encapsulated by the image and reduce anxiety. Imagery rescripting involves modifying the meaning of an arousing or distressing image through the use of imagery techniques. This procedure, which targets the content of an image, aims to change the idiosyncratic meaning of the image to the individual and therefore reduces its power to elicit negative emotions. However, it is not clear exactly how imagery rescripting works.

Images of the self are constructed representations that are probably formed from multiple inputs. Rapee and Heimberg (1997), for example, argue that mental representations of the self draw on information retrieved from long-term memory as well as incorporating information from more immediate sources such as proprioceptive and physiological feedback. Clark and Wells (1995) point out that socially phobic individuals' images of themselves often contain visible exaggerations, so that a woman who worries about blushing might see herself in the image as a vibrant fire-engine red.

Images are not only important during social interactions, they can also play a role in anticipatory and post-event processing, both of which contribute to the maintenance of social phobia. Anticipatory and post-event processing are forms of ruminative processing, in which the individual retrieves memories of either recent or more distant social experiences and dwells on the negative aspects of them. One possible difference between rumination in depression and in social anxiety could be the presence of imagery; for example, James (2005) found that high socially anxious participants had more negatively valenced images during post-event processing than low socially anxious individuals. Self-imagery can lead to increased perception of body sensations and worse ratings of performance (Vassilopoulos, 2005). Spontaneously recurring images in socially phobic individuals are often related to early memories of aversive social experiences (Hackmann, Clark, & McManus, 2000).

The constructed images of the self reported by the socially phobic individuals could be conceptualised as the representations of the individual's current working self. The working self refers to the subset of self-schemas that is active at any given time (Markus & Nurius, 1986). According to Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000), self and memory are inextricably linked in a self-memory system where the working self draws on autobiographical memories to both set and constrain current goals. If this is the case, then negative

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