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Trait anxiety, trait depression, worry, and memory

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Abstract

A study is reported which investigated the proposal that high trait anxiety is associated with a memory bias for worry themes. Forty-five participants were categorised as being high or low trait anxious on the basis of scores on the (Spielberger et al., 1983) (Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Form Y) (1983)). The participants were requested to rate a number of worry and non-worry statements for how much they generally thought about the issues represented by them. Analysis of the ratings given by the participants showed that low trait anxiety individuals thought about the non-worry items significantly more than worry items. The high trait anxiety participants, however, showed little or no difference in the amount of time spent thinking about worry and non-worry themes. In a subsequent free recall task of the statements it was observed that the low trait anxiety group recalled significantly more non-worry than worry items, whereas there was no such difference for the high trait group. It was also found that the degree of memory bias was related to both positive affectivity and trait anxiety. The implications of such findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the last 20 years, the cognitive perspective of researching emotions has become the dominant approach in psychology (Lazarus, 1999). Yet, there is still much controversy within this discipline, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the study of emotion and memory. There is much evidence demonstrating an attentional bias associated with anxiety (see MacLeod, 1999, for a review) and a memory bias associated with depression (see Blaney, 1986, for a

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review). Additionally, there is relatively consistent evidence showing the absence of an attentional bias associated with depression (see, for example, Mogg & Bradley, 1998). As far as memory and anxiety is concerned, however, the research to date has been rather equivocal (Becker, Roth, Andrich, & Margraf, 1999).

Given its controversial nature, the current study was designed to further examine the link between anxiety and memory. A fairly large body of research has already investigated this link, but as yet no consistent pattern has emerged. Much of the research to date has, however, concentrated on clinical forms of anxiety. For example, the majority of studies which have investigated Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) have found no association between the disorder and memory for negative information. Mathews, Mogg, May and Eysenck (1989) compared GAD patients with non-anxious controls using a free-recall task and found no memory bias associated with GAD (see also Becker, Roth, Andrich & Margraf, 1999). In contrast to such findings Mogg, Mathews and Weinman (1987) found that GAD patients had a memory bias for non-threatening rather than threatening information. These authors suggested that GAD patients may actively avoid elaborative processing of threat and thus have poorer recall of such information. There is thus inconsistency in the research findings, a pattern which has been observed with other clinical forms of anxiety, including social phobia (see Becker, Roth, Andrich & Margraf, 1999; Wenzel & Holt, 2002), panic disorder (e.g. McNally, Foa, & Donnell, 1989; Becker, Roth, Andrich & Margraf, 1999) and spider phobia (Watts, Trezise, & Sharrock, 1986; Wessel & Merckelbach, 1998).

The foregoing overview suggests that there is conflicting evidence for a memory bias associated with clinical forms of anxiety. In addition to studying clinical anxiety, many researchers have investigated non-clinical forms of anxiety. In particular there has been substantial research into trait anxiety as a cognitive vulnerability factor for GAD (see Eysenck, 1992, 1997). As with the research involving clinical forms of anxiety that relating to trait anxiety has yielded rather equivocal results. Some research has demonstrated evidence of a memory bias associated with high trait anxiety (e.g. Reidy & Richards, 1997a,b), whilst other studies have found no evidence for such a bias (e.g. Richards & French, 1991). In the Reidy and Richards studies, high trait and low trait anxious individuals were given a free recall task involving positive, negative and neutral trait adjectives. Three studies from these two papers reported evidence of a recall bias for threatening words associated with high trait anxiety. Similarly, Nugent and Mineka (1994) reported one study in which a memory bias was found for anxiety-related words. There does, therefore, seem to be some evidence of superior memory for threat-related information associated with high trait anxiety. There have, however, been many studies which have reported little or no enhancement of memory associated with high trait anxiety. Richards and French (1991), for example, tested high and low trait anxious participants with a free recall task and found no differences in memory performance between the two groups. Similar results have been reported by Bradley, Mogg and Williams (1994); Dalgleish (1994) and Reidy (1994).

One of the most puzzling aspects of the research into trait anxiety is the inconsistency of the findings. A reason for such inconsistency suggested by Reidy & Richards, 1997b) was that the findings may be due to the variations in the type of stimuli used in such studies. Where memory biases have been observed with other forms of anxiety, the stimuli used were specific to the form of anxiety under investigation. For example, Watts, Trezise and Sharrock (1986) used freeze-dried spiders when testing spider phobics, and McNally, Foa and Donnell (1989) used panic-

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