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Interpersonal appraisals of emotionally distressed persons by anxious and dysphoric individuals

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Abstract

Coyne [J. Abnorm. Psychol. 85 (1976a) 186; Psychiatry 29 (1976b) 28] first reported that depressed persons were negatively appraised interpersonally by interaction partners. The purpose of the current study was to replicate previous findings extending Coyne's theory to anxious individuals and to assess how anxiety and depression of the raters may affect these ratings. Anxious, dysphoric, and control participants watched a video of an actor portraying anxious, depressed, or neutral affect ($n = 208$). Results indicated that the actor portraying depressed affect was assessed more negatively than the actor portraying anxious affect who, in turn, was assessed more negatively than the actor portraying neutral affect. However, anxious and dysphoric participants did not differ from control participants in their ratings of the videos.

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According to Coyne's (1976b) interpersonal model of depression, individuals who interact with a depressed person may experience negative emotions as a result of this interaction. Although these individuals may attempt to compensate with somewhat nongenuine reassurance and support, they may also exhibit rejection toward those displaying symptoms of depression, particularly through avoidance. He further proposed that this pattern of avoidance may serve to further increase depressive symptoms and validate the depressed person's negative self-view.

In the first study testing hypotheses associated with this model, Coyne (1976a) found that individuals who spoke on the telephone with an unfamiliar depressed target¹ from an outpatient mental health center did indeed experience more symptoms of depression, anxiety, and hostility than did individuals who interacted with a nondepressed target from the same center. They were also more likely to reject the depressed target than the nondepressed target. These conclusions were confirmed by later studies (e.g., Sacco & Dunn, 1990; Strack & Coyne, 1983; see Segrin & Dillard, 1992, for a review).

Although interpersonal rejection of depressed people has been found to be a robust and reliable effect, some attempts at replication have revealed limits to the range of conditions under which it occurs. For example, in their meta-analysis, Marcus and Nardone (1992) reviewed evidence providing strong support for Coyne's model when examining long-term relationships, interactions with confederates portraying depressed persons, transcripts, or video and audiotapes of depressed targets. However, interactions with depressed strangers did not consistently elicit rejection and negative mood.

Most of the research on interpersonal functioning in depression has failed to examine whether interpersonal dysfunction is specific to depression or whether it is also characteristic of anxiety or a more general type of distress. Many researchers have noted the strong relationship between depression and anxiety (see Clark & Watson, 1991b; Maser & Cloninger, 1990; Mineka, Watson, & Clark, 1998, for reviews), thus increasing the likelihood that negative interpersonal appraisals might well also be found in response to anxious individuals (who are not very depressed) (e.g., Gurtman, Martin, & Hintzman, 1990). This is particularly interesting to examine in light of the elevated anxiety levels present in virtually all depressed individuals (e.g., Mineka et al., 1998). Indeed, in theory it could be the case that anxious symptoms rather than depressive symptoms per se are largely or partly responsible for negative interpersonal appraisals of nominally "depressed" individuals. It is also possible that similar interpersonal styles may lead to negative appraisals of anxious individuals. For example, increases in anxiety symptoms have been found to be related to increases in reassurance seeking (e.g., Joiner, Katz, & Lew, 1999). Reassurance seeking, in turn, has been linked to social rejection and negative appraisals of depressed individuals by others (Joiner, Alfonso, & Metalsky, 1992).

¹Throughout this manuscript, the word "target" is used to describe the person who is being interpersonally appraised.

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