



Neuroticism, preattentive and attentional biases towards threat, and anxiety before and after a severe stressor: a prospective study

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Abstract

This study was designed to prospectively investigate the role of neuroticism, trait anxiety and attentional biases towards threat in the development of anxiety after a failed IVF or ICSI treatment. A subliminal and supraliminal Stroop task was administered to 49 women entering IVF or ICSI treatment as well as self-report measures of neuroticism, trait anxiety and state anxiety. The assessment of state anxiety was repeated after failed treatment. Results of concurrent analyses have indicated that there was no relationship between Stroop factors and state anxiety. As hypothesised, prospective analyses showed a significant effect for neuroticism and Stroop interference on anxiety response to failed IVF or ICSI treatment. This effect was only apparent for interference on stressor related words and not for words related to general threat. The effect of subliminal Stroop interference was more pronounced in a subsample of women showing an increase in anxiety as a result of failed treatment. It can be concluded that, in addition to neuroticism, subliminal Stroop interference is a predictor for emotional response to an aversive stressor, such as failed IVF or ICSI treatment.

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1. Introduction

Stress vulnerability models differ in their attention to factors supposed to be the main predictors of the development of anxiety disorders. Models of personality dimensions stress the importance of neuroticism and trait anxiety, whereas cognitive models stress the importance of information processing. Until now, studies have mainly focussed on one of these two models, as a result of which relatively less attention has been paid to the additional contribution of factors from both models in the development of anxiety disorders. Information about this would increase our understanding of how to identify which individuals are more vulnerable than others to developing anxiety. The object of the present study is to illuminate this by investigating the concurrent and prospective relationship between factors of both models and state anxiety, before and after the occurrence of an aversive stressor.

Personality theories have stressed the importance of negative affectivity and underlying constructs, such as neuroticism and trait anxiety. It is assumed that individuals vulnerable to developing anxiety disorders are characterised by enhanced sensitivity to aversive stimuli (Clark, Watson & Mineka, 1994; Eysenck, 1970, 1998; Watson & Clark, 1984). This enhanced sensitivity is the main characteristic of negative affectivity. Neuroticism can be defined as a general sensitivity to negative information, trait anxiety as an enhanced sensitivity to threatening information. Neuroticism and trait anxiety are generally assessed by self-report measures, like the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) and the Spielberger Trait and State Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983).

Cognitive theories have proposed that enhanced vulnerability is explained by the selective processing of threatening information (Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996; Mogg & Bradley, 1998). In anxiety, selective processing is shown as an attentional bias towards threatening information. Pathological fear occurs when a fear structure is activated without further processing of threatening information (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Further processing involves incorporation of new information that is incompatible with the fear structure and results in its modification. Activation of the fear structure causes an orientation towards threat in the initial phase of information processing. Relaxed subjects are better able to entirely process threatening information, whereas this entire processing takes too much effort when subjects are under stress (Foa & Kozak, 1986).

Foa and Kozak did not differentiate between preconscious and conscious activation of fear structures. Later theories, like those of Beck and Clark (1997) and Mogg and Bradley (1998), proposed that biases in the processing of threatening information take place on preattentive (preconscious) and attentional (conscious) levels.

Preattentive and attentional biases towards threatening information are most frequently identified with an emotional Stroop task. In the emotional Stroop task, subjects are asked to name the colour of a word as quickly as possible, while ignoring the meaning of the word. Colour-naming interference is positively related to the emotional valence of the word.

Attentional biases towards general threat words are most frequently identified in clinical samples (see for reviews: Mathews & MacLeod, 1994; Mogg & Bradley, 1998; Williams et al. 1996). A few studies have also reported a *preattentive* bias towards threatening information in clinical samples (Lundh, Wikstrom, Westerlund, & Ost, 1999; Mogg, Kentish, & Bradley, 1993).

In non-clinical samples, there is less evidence of a relationship between anxiety and attentional biases towards threatening information. MacLeod and Ruthenford (1992) proposed that this

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