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Neuroticism and affective priming: Evidence for a neuroticism-linked negative schema

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Abstract

Neuroticism has been hypothesized to systematically relate to semantic memory networks favoring negative affect, but no studies using affective priming tasks have established this link. The present two studies, involving 145 undergraduate participants, sought to provide initial evidence along these lines. Study 1 used a task in which participants were asked to judge their emotions in the past, whereas Study 2 used a perceptual identification task in which participants merely had to identify the word in question. In both studies, neuroticism was positively correlated with negative affective priming, but not positive affective priming. The studies suggest that neuroticism systematically relates to the inter-connectivity of negative affect within semantic memory systems, whether involving the self-concept (Study 1) or not (Study 2). These results are novel and important in understanding individual differences in neuroticism and their affective processing correlates.

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1. Introduction

Neuroticism is frequently linked to negative affect, worry, and reports of somatic symptoms (Watson, 2000). It is therefore sensible to propose that many of the correlates of neuroticism may involve negatively biased affective memory networks (Rusting, 1998). Although sources of data linking neuroticism to negative judgment and interpretation biases are robust, such data tend to involve self-reports rather than associative measures suited to assessing cognitive-affective processes (Robinson & Neighbors, 2006). Studies that have used cognitive paradigms sensitive to accessibility, interference, and retrieval effects for negative stimuli provide much weaker and mixed support for the idea that neuroticism systematically relates to cognitive biases related to negative stimuli (Matthews & Gilliland, 1999; Rusting, 1998). Thus, it is important to clarify the information-processing basis of neuroticism, which we do here in terms of accessibility effects involving negative stimuli.

On the one hand, neuroticism may predict the speed with which negative affective stimuli can be encoded. However, this hypothesis does not fare well in studies that have examined it (Rusting, 1998; Tamir & Robinson, 2004). On the other hand, neuroticism may relate to affective memory networks favoring negative thoughts. In the latter case, individuals high in neuroticism should exhibit a greater degree of facilitation for the second of two consecutive negative stimuli. Indeed, the idea that individuals high in neuroticism have a stronger inter-connectivity of negative affective thoughts seems quite plausible. Individuals high in neuroticism react to negative events more strongly (e.g., Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998) and also ruminate on negative events to a greater extent (e.g., Muris, Roelofs, Rassin, Franken, & Mayer, 2005). These sorts of effects appear to implicate spreading activation processes, favoring negative affect, at high levels of neuroticism.

To examine this potential association between neuroticism and negative affective priming, we built upon recent developments in the literature. Affective priming tasks are ones in which the researcher seeks to examine whether exposure to a positive or negative affective prime facilitates (i.e., speeds) classifications of a subsequent positive or negative affective target (Klauer & Musch, 2003). Much of the emphasis in the literature has been on the minimal conditions necessary for affective priming (Fazio, 2001; Klauer & Musch, 2003), but multiple investigators have pointed to the intriguing potential of the task for assessing individual differences in affective memory networks (Banse, 2003; Robinson, *in press*).

To examine individual differences in affective memory networks, it is desirable to focus on valence-specific priming effects, which permit one to make unique conclusions in relation to positive and negative affective associations (Robinson, *in press*). Prior studies in this assessment-related tradition link life satisfaction (Robinson & Kirkeby, 2005) and self-deception (Robinson & Goetz, *submitted for publication*) to stronger priming effects in relation to positive targets, but no research that we know of has linked neuroticism to stronger priming effects in relation to negative targets. This was the specific focus of the present studies. Prior to discussing the specific studies, it is useful to say more about priming procedures.

1.1. Priming procedures

In the traditional priming task reviewed by Neely (1991), primes are presented as task-irrelevant stimuli and it is thought that they will automatically activate an associated semantic memory

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