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Psychiatry Research 113 (2002) 279–293

PSYCHIATRY
RESEARCH

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Interpersonal deficits meet cognitive biases: memory for facial expressions in depressed and anxious men and women

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Received 31 January 2002; received in revised form 30 September 2002; accepted 14 October 2002

Abstract

Memory biases for negatively vs. positively valenced linguistic information in depression are well documented. However, no study so far has examined the relationship between depression and memory for facial expressions. We examined memory for neutral, happy, sad, and angry facial expressions in individuals suffering from comorbid depression and anxiety (COMs, $N=23$) or from anxiety disorders (ANXs, $N=20$) and in normal controls (NACs, $N=23$). Two main hypotheses were examined. First, we expected COMs, but not NACs, to exhibit an enhanced memory for sad and angry vs. happy expressions (negativity hypothesis). Second, we postulated that this bias would be specific to depression (disorder-specificity hypothesis). Data supported both these hypotheses. Specifically, COMs exhibited enhanced recognition of angry compared to happy expressions; in contrast, ANXs and NACs did not exhibit such enhancement. We also found that men showed a significantly better memory for angry vs. sad expressions, whereas women did not exhibit such a difference. The implications of these findings for the interpersonal processes involved in the maintenance of depression and anxiety are discussed.

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Keywords: Memory biases; Depression; Facial expressions; Comorbidity; Gender differences

1. Introduction

Until recently, models of depression maintenance tended to be neatly divided into cognitive (e.g. Beck, 1967, 1976) and interpersonal (e.g. Coyne, 1976) types. A growing realization that such single-factor models cannot capture the complexity of human functioning has led to a more

complete integration of cognitive and social factors involved in the maintenance of depression (e.g. Joiner, 2000; Hammen, 1997). Interpersonal transaction is likely to interact with cognitive structures to ameliorate or exacerbate negative mood; cognitive processes are likely to interact with the social environment to contribute to the probability of engaging or disengaging in social contact. However, whereas the importance of combining basic research in interpersonal processes with basic research in cognitive processes was realized on a theoretical level, few attempts have been made to

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implement it empirically. One area that is surprisingly absent from such research concerns memory biases for interpersonal information. Filling this gap is the purpose of this study.

Theorists from various perspectives proposed that depressed individuals should show a mood-congruent memory bias, that is, selective memory for material that is consistent with the depressed mood and/or concerns (e.g. Beck, 1967, 1987; Bower, 1987; Williams et al., 1988, 1997). Indeed, memory biases for verbal information have been consistently found in both clinical and sub-clinical samples (e.g. Williams et al., 1997). Specifically, many studies have shown that clinically and sub-clinically depressed individuals are negatively biased in the recall of emotionally valenced verbal material (for review, see Matt et al., 1992). In a typical study, participants are presented with mood- or personality-relevant descriptive words (negative and positive trait adjectives), and are instructed to carry out self-referent processing of the words (e.g. Bradley and Mathews, 1983). A robust finding across these studies is that clinically depressed adults show higher recall for negative adjectives than for positive adjectives, whereas non-depressed subjects are either even-handed or positively biased in their recall (Bradley and Mathews, 1983, 1988; Mathews and Bradley, 1983; Bradley et al., 1995; Denny and Hunt, 1992; Derry and Kuiper, 1981; Elliott and Greene, 1992; Watkins et al., 1992).

However, the examination of memory biases in depressed individuals has hitherto been limited to verbal information. Surprisingly, no study so far has examined depressives' memory for visually presented, interpersonally relevant information. Facial expressions of emotions seem particularly well suited for this purpose (Foa et al., 2000). First, facial expressions are ubiquitous and biologically significant (e.g. Hansen and Hansen, 1994; Ekman and Friesen, 1976). Second, facial expressions of emotions are salient features of the interpersonal environment that are present in most interactions and are a powerful social stimulus (e.g. Buck, 1984; Ekman, 1993).

The gap in the study of memory for facial expression in depression is even more surprising given that recognition and interpretation of emo-

tional expressions by depressed individuals have been a subject of considerable scrutiny. Although evidence is still conflicting, it has been reported that depressed patients showed an impaired ability to decode facial expressions (Gur et al., 1992; Mikhailova et al., 1996; Rubinow and Post, 1992; but see also Lane and DePaulo, 1999). For example, Gur et al. (1992) found that depressed patients performed more poorly on measures of sensitivity for happy discrimination and specificity for sad discrimination and had a higher negative bias across tasks. They also found that severity of negative affect was correlated with poorer performance. Thus, they concluded that depression is associated with an impaired ability to recognize facial displays of emotion. Persad and Polivy (1993) assessed depressed individuals' identification of and behavioral response to various emotional expressions. They also found that depressed individuals were impaired in the identification of emotional expressions as compared to normal controls (but not to other psychiatric controls). In that study, depressed individuals also reported more distress in reaction to emotional faces. For example, depressed individuals reported more freezing or tensing; higher fear and depression reactions; and less comfort with their own emotional reactions.

Recently, Bouhuys et al. (1999) found that high levels of perception of negative emotions in schematic ambiguous faces, whether assessed at admission or at remission, were associated with relapse into depression 6 months thereafter. Importantly, this finding could not be accounted for by differences in other related variables such as type of depression, gender, initial severity of depression, duration of the index episode, residual symptoms at remission, differences in medication, or age. Based on these data, Bouhuys et al. argue that fundamental cognitive mechanisms specifically concerning nonverbal interpersonal stimuli are involved in depression relapse.

In sum, memory biases for negative self-relevant information in depression on the one hand, and depressives' sensitivity to emotional expressions on the other, point to the importance of examining memory for interpersonal information. Because depressed individuals as a group exhibit social

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