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Social phobics do not misinterpret facial expression of emotion[☆]

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Abstract

Attentional biases in the processing of threatening facial expressions in social anxiety are well documented. It is generally assumed that these attentional biases originate in an evaluative bias: socially threatening information would be evaluated more negatively by socially anxious individuals. However, three studies have failed to evidence a negative evaluative bias in the processing of emotional facial expression (EFE) in socially anxious individuals. These studies however suffer from several methodological limitations that the present study has attempted to overcome. Twenty-one out-patients diagnosed with generalized social phobia have been compared to 20 out-patients diagnosed with another anxiety disorder and with 39 normal controls matched for gender, age and level of education. They had to decode on seven emotion intensity scales a set of 40 EFE whose intensity and emotional nature were manipulated. Although sufficient statistical power was ensured, no differences among groups could be found in terms of decoding accuracy, attributed emotion intensity, or reported difficulty of the task. Based on these findings as well as on other evidences, we propose that, if they exist, evaluative biases in social anxiety should be implicit and automatic and that they might be determined by the relevance of the stimulus to the person's concern rather than by the stimulus valence. The implications of these findings for the interpersonal processes involved in social phobia are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Etiological models (Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985; Clark & Wells, 1995; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997) as well as empirical evidences (see Clark & McManus, 2002; Heinrichs & Hofmann, 2001; Musa & Lépine, 2000, for reviews) support the idea that cognitive processes play a key role in social phobia. The interpretation of social information seems to be specifically at stake (Amir, Foa, & Coles, 1998; Stopa & Clark, 2000), specially the information related to negative social evaluation and its negative consequences: social humiliation and embarrassment. In this perspective, the processing of non-verbal information is likely to be particularly important, as social disapproval is rarely verbally and directly expressed due to social convention. Given that emotional facial expressions (EFE) are the most used channel to convey inner states such as emotion and attitude (Patterson, 1999), the ability to decode them might constitute a cognitive skill particularly relevant for the explanation of social anxiety.

Several lines of research have examined possible biases in the way socially anxious individuals process EFE. The most fecund line has addressed whether socially anxious individuals present an attentional bias for threatening EFE (Bradley, Mogg, & Millar, 2000; Chen, Ehlers, Clark, & Mansell, 2002; Gilboa-Schechtman, Foa, & Amir, 1999; Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, & Chen, 1999; Mogg & Bradley, 2002). Articulating this literature, several authors (e.g. Mogg & Bradley, 2002) have proposed a two-stage model in which anxious individuals show an initial hypervigilance for threatening EFE. This hypervigilance would be the consequence of automatic processes and it could be observed without conscious perception of threat-relevant information (Mogg & Bradley, 2002). However, at further and less automatic stages of information processing, anxious people would actively turn away from threatening information. Thus, this model postulates a dynamic shift of attention allocation from initial threat hypervigilance to later threat avoidance.

Other lines of research have addressed the issues of memory and evaluative biases for EFE in social anxiety. There have been surprisingly few studies conducted on these topics. Concerning memory biases for threatening EFE, three studies have provided inconclusive results: Lundh and Öst (1996) as well as Foa, Gilboa-Schechtman, Amir, and Freshman (2000) have observed that socially anxious individuals exhibit a negative memory bias towards threatening EFE. In contrast, Perez-Lopez and Woody (2001) failed to observe such a bias.

Concerning evaluative biases in EFE decoding, to our knowledge, only three studies on adults have been published. Merckelbach, Van Hout, Van den Hout, and Mersch (1989) observed no differences between nine social phobics and nine controls in their evaluation of angry, neutral, and joyful faces with respect to pleasantness. We recently replicated this intriguing result (Douilliez & Philippot, 2003): socially anxious and non-anxious students were asked to evaluate the threatening value of angry-threatening, joyful, and neutral faces. No differences between anxious individuals and controls were observed for the evaluation of faces. However, some differences between socially anxious and non-anxious were found in a study using a different procedure: Winton, Clark, and Edelman (1995) very briefly (60 ms) exposed socially anxious and non-anxious students to negative and neutral facial expressions. Following this subliminal presentation, participants had to guess whether the EFE was negative or neutral. The results showed that students high in social anxiety identified negative EFE better than non-anxious students while the reverse was true for neutral expressions. However, further analyses demonstrated that these effects were due to an overall negativity bias in the anxious students

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