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Appraisals and impression management opportunities: person and situation influences on cardiovascular reactivity

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Abstract

This study examined how threat and coping appraisals and impression management opportunities influenced cardiovascular reactivity within a self-presentation context. Participants were videotaped performing a speech that they believed might be evaluated. Participants' physiological responses were recorded 1 week later while: (a) watching their speech, indicating which portions they wished to re-shoot before it was evaluated; (b) simply watching their speech; or (c) watching an architectural videotape and indicating which portions should be reshot, and also watching their own speech, but without evaluation concerns. Cardiovascular reactivity was influenced by the presence or absence of the impression management opportunity, but more variance in reactivity was explained when participants' threat and coping appraisals were also taken into account. The specific cardiovascular responses pertinent to goal-relevant action within each condition were the only responses related to appraisals. These findings emphasize the importance of considering both the situation and the state of the individual in that situation when attempting to understand social psychological influences on physiological reactivity. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Psychophysiological researchers examining stress responses and coping have identified a number of relationships between situational properties and physiological responding during stressful lab-

oratory tasks (Sherwood et al., 1990b; Gerin et al., 1992; Kamarck et al., 1998 for examples). In a previous article (Hartley et al., 1999), we reported that the availability or absence of opportunities to manage one's impression differentially influenced cardiovascular reactivity in a self-presentation context. We also reported that we were unable to replicate the prior findings by Tomaka et al. (1993) regarding relationships between situated cognitive appraisals of threat and challenge and subsequent cardiovascular responses when ignor-

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ing between-group differences in opportunities for impression management. However, we had treated the situational characteristics and state individual differences separately. Situated activity is best understood as a function of the relationship between the individual and the environment (Bandura, 1986; Alexander and Wiley, 1990). It follows that the cardiovascular reactivity of individuals is best understood by addressing this relationship; that is, cardiovascular response is the situated activity of interest. As such, the present report is a reconsideration and extension of our prior findings and addresses the *simultaneous* influence of situated cognitive appraisals and action opportunities on cardiovascular reactivity to stress.

2. Situational specificity, action opportunities and physiological patterns

Psychophysiological researchers have long recognized the importance of *situational response specificity*, a concept introduced by Lacey (1967) referring to the assumption that specific tasks reliably elicit particular physiological response patterns. Several studies have described such patterns (e.g. Lacey et al., 1963; Williams, 1986; Schneiderman and McCabe, 1989), and one conceptual scheme, namely the active vs. passive coping scheme (Obrist, 1981), has been reliably used in many studies of stress and coping (Light and Obrist, 1980; Gerin et al., 1992; Bongard, 1995; Beh and Herrod, 1998; Boiten, 1998). To briefly review, Obrist (1981) demonstrated that active tasks, such as reaction-time tests or mental arithmetic tasks, resulted in a beta-adrenergic (or myocardial) response pattern characterized by increases in heart rate and systolic blood pressure without a necessary increase in diastolic blood pressure. Passive tasks, such as the cold pressor task, elicited an alpha-adrenergic (or vascular) response pattern, resulting in increased diastolic blood pressure with less change in systolic blood pressure and heart rate. We observed the same myocardial and vascular patterns when groups were differentiated in terms of whether they had an opportunity to manage the impression they believed they would be making on others (Hartley et al., 1999). These patterns have also been observed when examining

individual differences in situated cognitive appraisal of potential stress.

3. Threat appraisals and physiological patterns

Lazarus and Folkman (1987) define cognitive appraisal as a process whereby individuals categorize an encounter and its properties with regard to its impact on their well being. The authors identify two components of the appraisal process: the primary and the secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal refers to the perceived threat of the situation for the individual; secondary appraisal is the individual's perceived ability to cope within the situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Tomaka et al. (1993) assessed cognitive appraisals prior to a stressful task and reported that challenged participants (those below the median distribution of the ratio of perceived threat to perceived coping, i.e. primary appraisal to secondary appraisal) exhibited greater myocardial reactivity during active coping stressors (e.g. mental arithmetic) than threatened participants (those above the median distribution of the ratio of perceived threat to perceived coping), who demonstrated greater vascular reactivity. During tasks involving passive coping stressors, namely viewing graphic slides of accident victims and surgery patients, only primary appraisals were related to physiological reactivity, such that the greater the level of perceived threat, the greater the cardiac activation and inhibition of parasympathetic influence on the heart. Secondary appraisals were unrelated to physiological reactivity. Tomaka et al. (1993) argue that this is due to the nature of passive coping: passive coping stressors do not afford individuals an opportunity for action, and thus coping, within the situation. Rather, they are passive recipients of environmental stimuli and appraisals regarding ability to cope within such a situation may be irrelevant.

4. Situated opportunities, appraisals and physiological reactivity

The findings reported here considered cognitive appraisals and the opportunities for managing an impression together as constituents of the context

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