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Selective attention in social phobia and the moderating effect of a concurrent depressive disorder

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Abstract

Studies using the modified Stroop colour naming task have provided results consistent with the hypothesis that social phobia is associated with an attentional bias towards negative social-evaluative words. However, these results could also have arisen as a consequence of non-attentional processes. For this reason, the present study uses a modified version of MacLeod et al.'s (*J. Abnorm. Psychol.* 95 (1986) 15) dot-probe task, which provides a more direct measure of attention. Patients with social phobia ($n = 28$), patients with social phobia and a concurrent depressive disorder ($n = 33$), and non-patients ($n = 40$) were presented with word pairs each consisting of a neutral word and a threat word. The results indicated that patients with social phobia show an attentional bias towards social-threat words while non-patients tend to avoid social-threat words. Patients with social phobia and a concurrent depressive disorder behaved like non-patients, indicating that concurrent depression abolishes the attentional bias. Physical threat words were also included in the study. The main analysis indicated that social phobia is also associated with an attentional bias to physical threat. However, a post hoc analysis (which requires replication) suggested that the physical threat bias might have arisen because some social phobia patients also had another anxiety disorder in which physical concerns are likely to have been prominent. Overall, the results emphasise the importance of assessing comorbidity when investigating attentional biases.

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1. Introduction

Several theories (for example, Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985; Eysenck, 1997; Mathews, 1997; Mogg & Bradley, 1998; Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews 1988, 1997,) propose that a key cognitive factor underlying vulnerability to, and maintenance of, anxiety disorders is an attentional bias to threat cues. This bias is presumed to operate at the early stages of information processing which are responsible for initial orienting to, and rapid detection of, threat in the environment. Such an attentional bias has been demonstrated in several anxiety disorders, including: generalised anxiety disorder (e.g. MacLeod, Mathews, & Tata, 1986; Mogg, Bradley, & Williams, 1995), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Foa & McNally, 1986), panic disorder (McNally, Reiman, & Kim, 1990) and posttraumatic stress disorder (Foa, Freske, Murdock, Kozak, & McCarthy, 1991).

In contrast the findings in anxiety disorders, several studies have failed to demonstrate the existence of an early attentional bias in clinical depression (e.g. Bradley, Mogg, Millar, & White, 1996; MacLeod et al., 1986; Mc Cabe & Gotlib, 1995). In the light of these results, Williams et al. (1988, 1997) suggested that anxiety and depression are associated with different types of biases in information processing. According to them, anxiety is primarily characterised by a bias in preattentive processes and selective attention while depression is mainly associated with a bias in postattentive elaborative processes, such as in recall. A recent study by Mogg, Millar, and Bradley (2000), which used facial stimuli and assessed attentional bias by the direction and latency of eye movements, seems to have confirmed the hypothesised difference in attentional processes between anxiety and depression. Generalised anxiety disorder patients were more likely to look first towards threat faces than neutral faces when compared to patients with depression or non-patients. The depressed patients did not differ from the non-patient controls.

It is not clear, however, what happens to attention in patients with the dual diagnosis of an anxiety disorder and a depressive disorder. Williams et al.'s (1988, 1997) theory does not address the issue. To our knowledge, only one empirical study has attempted to investigate the question. Bradley et al. (1996) used the modified Stroop task and compared colour naming times for threat words and neutral words in generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) patients with and without a concurrent depressive disorder. Compared to non-patient controls, GAD patients without concurrent depression showed greater interference in colour naming times for negative words than neutral words. GAD patients with concurrent depression did not differ from the non-patients. This pattern of results is consistent with the suggestion that a concurrent depressive disorder abolishes the attentional bias that would normally be associated with an anxiety disorder. However, the modified Stroop task has been criticised as a measure of selective attention. In particular, MacLeod (1991) and MacLeod et al. (1986) has pointed out that the increase in interference that is used as an index of selective attention in the modified Stroop task could arise from several non-attention related processes.

To overcome the interpretative difficulties inherent in the modified Stroop task, the present study used a more direct measure of attention to further investigate the effect of a concurrent depressive disorder on attentional bias in anxiety disorders. The measure chosen was a modified version of MacLeod et al.'s (1986) dot-probe task in which speeding of reaction times (RTs) is used as an index of attentional bias. A further difference from Bradley et al.'s (1996) study was

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