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Temperament and early information processing: Temperament-related attentional bias in emotional Stroop tasks [☆]

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Abstract

Two emotional Stroop tasks (EST) using different stimuli (valent words and emotional faces) were used to study relations of EST-interferences with temperament and current mood. In both studies ($N_1 = 121$ and $N_2 = 124$), the reliability of the attentional bias measures was improved by employing individually trimmed means to calculate interference scores. Across the two studies, relations were found between temperament and attention to unpleasant and pleasant information.

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0. Introduction

Research on subjective well-being has shown that, within countries, external factors like wealth (Hagerty, 2000), marriage (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003), or physical health (Okun &

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George, 1984) explain 20% of individual differences in well-being at best (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Therefore, research has turned towards internal factors.

Indeed, numerous studies have found relations between personality and well-being (for reviews see DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener, 2000; Watson, 2000). In a longitudinal study, Costa and McCrae (1980) found that extraversion and neuroticism, measured 10 years prior to subjective well-being, predicted positive and negative affect, respectively. They concluded that temperament is important for individual well-being.

Several models have been suggested to explain the relations between personality and well-being: First, the set-point hypothesis states that individual differences in temperament account for an individual well-being set-point (Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998; Headey & Wearing, 1989). Second, the reactivity hypothesis implies that personality is related to the frequency or intensity of affective reactions (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985; Pickering, Corr, & Gray, 1999). The trait–congruency hypothesis (Rusting, 1999; Rusting & Larsen, 1998), that people more easily process information that is in line with their personality, exemplifies the reactivity hypothesis.

Elliot and Thrash (2002) have shown that neuroticism, strength of the behavior inhibition system (BIS), and dispositional negative emotionality load strongly on a temperament factor termed *Avoidance Temperament*, whereas extraversion, strength of the behavior activation system (BAS), and dispositional positive emotionality load on a temperament factor termed *Approach Temperament*. Research on trait congruency effects and information processing suggests that these two factors account for relations between emotional processing and personality: Rusting and Larsen (1998) found that extraversion predicted positive word-fragment completion and faster classification and better recall of pleasant words, whereas neuroticism predicted negative word-fragment completion and faster classification and better recall of unpleasant words. Using the same cognitive tasks, Gomez and Gomez (2002) replicated these findings for measures of BAS and BIS. According to William's integrative model for information processing in emotional disorders (Williams, Watts, MacLeod, & Mathews, 1997), these tasks mainly trigger elaborative information processing.

The purpose of the present research is to study attention to valent information during an early pre-elaborative stage of information processing (Williams et al., 1997), and how it is affected by avoidance and approach temperament. A paradigm often used to study attentional bias in emotional information processing is the so-called emotional Stroop task (EST; Williams, Mathews, & MacLeod, 1996): Valent stimuli-like unpleasant and pleasant words are displayed in different colours. Participants are instructed to indicate the colour as fast as possible while ignoring the stimulus meaning. But due to automatic processes (e.g., word reading), the stimulus activates mental representations of its meaning and associated valence. And the more attention is devoted to the meaning of the stimulus, the more strongly intrusive cognitions interfere with the completion of the colour-naming task. This should result in longer colour-naming latencies for valent than for neutral stimuli, an interference effect. Furthermore, personality may moderate this interference: Involuntary attention should be stronger if the colour of a personality–congruent stimulus is to be indicated.

Whereas ESTs were frequently used to study attentional bias to unpleasant stimuli in clinical groups, relations between EST-interference and positive traits have hardly been explored. In an EST using optimism-related words, Segerstrom (2001) found higher interferences for optimists

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