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Autobiographical memories of anxiety-related experiences

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Abstract

Ninety-nine undergraduate students retrieved three memories associated with each of the five emotional experiences: panic, trauma, worry, social anxiety, and feeling content. Subsequently, they answered 24 questions assessing properties of each memory, including the vividness and perceived accuracy of the memories and sensory, emotional, and anxiety-related experiences during retrieval. Memories were coded for affective tone and specificity. Results indicated that panic-related and trauma-related memories were rated similarly as content memories, but that they generally were associated with more imagery and emotional experiencing than worry-related or social anxiety-related memories. Participants experienced panic and worry symptoms to the greatest degree when they retrieved panic-related and trauma-related memories. All anxiety-related memories were characterized by more negative tone than content memories. Panic-related and trauma-related memories were more specific than worry-related, social anxiety-related, and content memories. These findings can explain partially why individuals with some, but not all, anxiety disorders experience enhanced memory for threatening material.

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1. Introduction

According to cognitive theories of anxiety disorders, anxious individuals process threat-related information in a biased manner (e.g., Beck & Clark, 1997; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Williams et al., 1997). Empirical work has provided robust evidence confirming that anxious individuals allocate their attention toward threat-related stimuli at the expense of neutral stimuli (e.g., Mogg &

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Bradley, 1998) and interpret ambiguous information as if it were dangerous (e.g., MacLeod & Cohen, 1993). On the other hand, evidence for enhanced memory for threat-related material in anxiety disorders is equivocal. Studies that examine memory for threat-related material in individuals with panic disorder (PD) and individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) generally find evidence for memory biases toward threat-related stimuli (e.g., McNally, Foa, & Donnell, 1989; Paunovic, Lundh, & Ost, 2002). In contrast, studies that examine memory for threat-related and neutral material in individuals with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) and individuals with social phobia (SP) generally do not find evidence for such a bias (e.g., Mogg, Mathews, & Weinman, 1987; Rapee et al., 1994). However, there are several exceptions to this pattern of findings (e.g., Amir, Foa, & Coles, 2000; Lundh & Ost, 1996), and confounding variables, such as the presence of comorbid depressive symptoms (e.g., Becker et al., 1999), further complicate interpretation of results.

One explanation for discrepant findings in this area is that the explicit and implicit memory paradigms used in most studies in this literature are not sensitive enough to activate relevant fear structures to induce cognitive biases in some anxiety disorders (cf. Burke & Mathews, 1992; Wenzel & Holt, 2002). That is, memory tasks using single words may not adequately capture the amount of threat that would create a sense of danger or discomfort and would in turn bias the sequence of information processing. This explanation runs contrary to robust findings in the literature examining attentional biases in anxiety disorders. Although single words are adequate to activate fear structures in tasks that require relatively shallow processing such as those used to assess attentional biases (e.g., MacLeod, Mathews, & Tata, 1986), tasks assessing memory biases may require more elaborate processing (cf. Mogg et al., 1987). It is possible that stimuli for these memory tasks need to resemble more closely the type of threat that is encountered in the everyday lives of individuals with anxiety disorders.

To address this methodological concern, many researchers have adopted autobiographical memory tasks to examine memories of events that anxious individuals have actually experienced. Autobiographical memory is the recollection of one's personal experiences that incorporates verbal description, mental imagery, and often emotional experiencing (Rubin, 1996). However, it is also difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the nature of anxiety-related memories in this literature. For example, individuals with GAD demonstrate enhanced memory for threat when autobiographical memory is assessed with some, but not all dependent variables (Burke & Mathews, 1992; Richards & Whittaker, 1990). Results from several investigations suggest that SP is not associated with enhanced retrieval of social threat memories (Rapee et al., 1994; Wenzel, Jackson, & Holt, 2002). Autobiographical memories of threat-related experiences have not been examined to date in individuals with PD. Although two investigations have found that PTSD is associated with difficulty in retrieving specific positive autobiographical memories (McNally et al., 1994, 1995), threat-related stimuli were not included in these designs. Thus, autobiographical memory is a promising method that has the potential to clarify the nature of memory biases in particular anxiety disorders, but additional research is needed to systematically investigate threat-related autobiographical memories in a similar manner across anxiety pathologies.

In addition, researchers have assumed that differences in specific anxiety-related pathologies and/or differences in methodologies account for the mixed findings in the anxiety and memory literature. However, one explanation that has not yet been considered is that the nature of some types of anxiety-related memories is inherently different than the nature of other types of anxiety-

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