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Social perceptions in psychiatric inpatients: relation to positive and negative affect levels

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Abstract

The present study investigated relationships between social perceptions and positive and negative affect levels within a hospitalized clinical sample. Seventy-four psychiatric inpatients (including 29 schizophrenics and 30 depressives) completed a measure of positive and negative affect (the PANAS). After reading a brief scenario describing a typical social gathering, these participants then indicated their degree of interest in finding out more information about two other persons at this gathering. One of these persons was portrayed as being outgoing and sociable, whereas the other was described as being extremely self-conscious and nervous. In addition, each participant provided self-perception ratings on a wide range of attributes (e.g. intellectual ability, artistic ability, physical health); several of which focused specifically on sociability aspects of self (e.g. social skills, ideal sociability level). Within our clinical sample, inpatients with higher positive affect scores were much more interested in obtaining information about both of the other persons described in the scenario than inpatients with lower levels of positive affect. Higher positive affect scores were also associated with more favorable self-perceptions regarding sociability aspects of self, but were less consistently related to self-perceptions that did not involve sociability elements. In contrast to positive affect, negative affect level was completely unrelated to degree of interest in finding out more information about others, and showed only very limited relationships with the self-perception ratings. These findings were then discussed in terms of the importance of considering both positive and negative affect levels when assessing social and self-perceptions within clinical ranges of psychopathology. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social perceptions; Positive affect; Negative affect; Psychopathology

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Considerable research has provided empirical support for the existence of two relatively independent and broad dimensions of positive and negative affect (Kuiper & Martin, 1998; Watson, Clark, McIntyre & Hamaker, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1997; Winter & Kuiper, 1997). Individuals with higher levels of positive affect generally approach their environment with more favorable expectations, and display a stronger willingness and enthusiasm to seek out and actively engage in various life events. The self-perceptions of these individuals are typically more positive in nature, with greater endorsement of self-descriptive terms such as alert, joyful, and energetic. In contrast, individuals displaying higher levels of negative affect more often report feeling irritable, and also indicate more frequent and intense experiences of fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt, hostility and self-dissatisfaction. In addition to these unfavorable self-perceptions, individuals scoring high on negative affect generally perceive their world and future in a negative manner, viewing their experiences as threatening, problematic, and distressing.

Several studies have provided more detail on the differential relationships between positive and negative affect and various measures of social activity, such as frequency of contact with others, degree of satisfaction with friends and relatives, and involvement in social groups or organizations. Early work by Watson (1988), for example, found that higher levels of positive affect were associated with increased time spent socializing with friends, whereas negative affect levels were unrelated to this measure of sociability. This general pattern was replicated in a further study by Watson et al. (1992), which also revealed that individuals with higher levels of positive affect engaged more frequently in a broader range of social activities. Once again, however, negative affect levels were unrelated to these indices of sociability.

Similar findings have been reported in research assessing the quality of social interactions (Berry & Hansen, 1996). Here, an analysis of social interaction diaries kept for one week by undergraduate students indicated that higher levels of positive affect were associated with higher ratings of quality and satisfaction for these interactions, whereas negative affect levels were not. Furthermore, this pattern was also evident in actual social interaction sessions conducted in a laboratory setting, with higher levels of positive affect once again associated with greater quality. Interestingly, this enhanced quality effect also emerged for ratings made by the undergraduate partners of individuals with high positive affect, as well as independent observers watching videotapes of these interactions. More generally, these findings support the notion that individuals with higher levels of positive affect focus more on the pleasurable aspects of social activities, thus deriving greater pleasure and satisfaction from these encounters (Watson et al., 1992).

1. Purpose of the present study

Although the above findings are certainly informative, much of the research to date has generally been conducted with samples of university undergraduate students. Thus, relatively little is known about the degree to which the above types of patterns for positive and negative affect may also be evident in individuals displaying clinical levels of psychopathology. As such, the main purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship of various social

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