Abstract

Threat-Related Attentional Bias in Relation to Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms in the

General Population: The Potential Role of Sex Effects

By

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Heightened sensitivity to relevant environmental stimuli (i.e., attentional bias) has been

observed in relation to clinical and non-clinical anxiety and depression symptoms. While

depression symptoms are associated with sensitivity to disorder and self-relevant words,

hypervigilance to threatening stimuli is observed in relation to anxiety symptoms.

Furthermore, attentional bias has been shown to play an important role in the

development and maintenance of depressive and anxiety disorders. Accordingly, a large

body of literature has examined threat-related attentional bias in relation to symptoms of

anxiety and depression. However, several methodological inconsistencies exist across

studies, including variability in definitions of threat, lack of consideration of differential

aspects of anxiety (physical arousal versus general distress), and the often overlooked

potential role of sex effects. Therefore, the current study aimed to examine the specificity

of threat-related attentional bias (for fear, disgust, anger, sadness), using a verbal

emotional Stroop task (EST), among individuals from the general population reporting

varying degrees of non-clinical symptoms of physical arousal, depression, and general

distress (worry). The potential moderating effects of sex in the relationships of threat-

related attentional bias with these symptoms were considered. Participants were 125 (37

men/88 women) undergraduate students. Participants were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire of mood and anxiety symptoms and a computerized EST. In the total sample, symptoms of general distress (worry), not physical arousal, predicted greater threat-related attentional bias to disgust words. Among women, symptoms of general distress predicted greater engagement with fear and disgust words. However, among men, symptoms of physical arousal predicted greater avoidance of fear and disgust words, whereas symptoms of general distress predicted greater avoidance of fear words, alone. Accordingly, disgust and fear may both underlie threat in relation to symptoms of anxiety. Findings of the current study point to the importance of considering the specificity of negative emotions, subtypes of anxiety, and the effects of sex when examining threat-related attentional bias in relation to symptoms of mood and anxiety. Findings hold potential to delineate the specific nature of threat-related attentional bias observed in relation to anxiety symptoms and to inform treatments strategies that target threat bias in anxiety.