Negative Emotion and Superficial Social Processing

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Two studies examined whether negative emotional arousal increases the tendency to process social information less carefully. In both studies, subjects were dental patients waiting to receive a filling from a student dentist. In Study 1, 48 subjects responded to illusory correlation materials adopted from Hamilton & Rose (1980). As expected, those above the median on self-reported anxiety were more likely than low-anxious subjects to exhibit illusory correlation effects. In Study 2, fear level was manipulated. Thirty-four dental patients were instructed to evaluate critically a persuasive message after receiving either graphic descriptions of their upcoming procedure or filler information. As expected, the message evaluations made by high-fear subjects were more influenced by superficial cues (audience applause) and less influenced by central cues (message content) than the message evaluations made by subjects.

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reporting at least moderate to high initial anxiety about dental treatment at the outset of the study. Theoretical and social implications are discussed.

A good number of psychological phenomena seem to result from superficial, low-effort processing. Some examples would include schematic biases (Fiske & Taylor, 1984), the use of various cognitive heuristics (Sherman & Corty, 1984), and superficial message processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1984; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Our research explores the possibility that individuals will be particularly likely to utilize such simplifying cognitive strategies when experiencing negative emotions. This prediction can be derived from either of two related perspectives. First, several extensive reviews of the attention literature have concluded that stressful emotional arousal limits attentional capacity (Broadbent, 1971; Cohen, 1978; Easterbrook, 1959; Kahneman, 1973). These conclusions have been based on the fact that manipulations such as threat, heat, task overload, and crowding have been found to impair performance on tasks such as digit-span memory, dual-task performance, and incidental memory.

At least one explanation for such effects is that negative emotional arousal triggers physiological changes that affect cortical activity (specifically heightening recurrent lateral inhibition), thereby lowering attentional capacity (Eysenck, 1977; Walley & Weiden, 1973). If negative emotion does lower capacity, as this “reduced-capacity” view suggests, one would expect such states to increase superficial processing, given that when attentional resources are limited, individuals do not have the capacity to consider deeply the various processing demands they face (Cohen, 1978). They, therefore, are more likely to employ superficial forms of processing. Indeed, it is possible that this tendency to employ strategies of cognitive simplification in stressful settings has adaptive significance given that carefully husbanding one’s limited attentional capacity better allows one to maintain some “reserve” capacity to appraise and cope with additional threatening environmental demands that occur.

A closely related but alternative view is that, under stress, individuals are more likely to allocate available attentional capacity to (a) appraising the stressor, (b) appraising their responses to the stressor, and (c) coping with the stressor (Lazarus, 1981; Mandler, 1975). As a result, stressed individuals are less likely to attend to other, stress-irrelevant, demands. Stated differently, this “attention allocation” view suggests that, when experiencing stressful emotions, our primary motivation is to process stress-relevant stimuli, and if we allocate attention in this manner (cf. Kahneman, 1973), we leave less capacity available for other processing demands. Although the reduced-capacity and attention-allocation views specify slightly different