

Reduced sensitivity in the recognition of anger and disgust in social phobia

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Patients suffering from social phobia are typically afraid of negative evaluations by others, as well as being humiliated in front of others. Consequently, several studies found socially phobic patients to show an attentional bias towards negative social cues. Craske et al. (1991) suggested that patients with a phobia display a twofold reaction to the stimulus of their phobia. Initially, there is a perceptual shift towards the stimulus, followed by a conscious attempt to avoid it. However, no studies have been performed focusing on the recognition of facial expressions. The aim of this study was to investigate whether patients with social phobia are able to interpret emotional facial expressions. We hypothesized patients with a social phobia would be less sensitive in recognition of negative facial expressions. Twenty-four patients with Generalized Social Phobia and twenty-six healthy controls were included. The emotional expression task entailed video clips from neutral faces changing into emotionally expressive faces, presented in different intensities. The results revealed that patients were overall less sensitive in recognizing negative facial expressions compared to the control group, and were specifically impaired in labelling anger and disgust, two emotions that play a role in interpersonal conflict or disapproval (Phillippot, 1999). The current results are in line with the vigilance-avoidance theory, suggesting that patients with social phobia actively avoid the elaborate processing of threatening material. Alternatively, it might be that a deficit in the recognition of specific emotional facial expressions underlies the social phobia itself.

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