Weakened adaptation for negative compared to positive emotions in individuals high in social anxiety

Erinda Morina, Sarah C. Izen & Vivian M. Ciaramitaro
University of Massachusetts Boston, MA, Psychology Department, Developmental and Brain Sciences

QUESTION: Does social anxiety status bias the strength of adaptation to positive vs negative emotional facial expressions?

Facial expressions represent a crucial source of information about others' emotions, feelings and intentions. Yet, correctly interpreting facial expressions may be disrupted in people with social anxiety (e.g., Yoon & Zinbarg, 2007). Studies have shown that socially anxious individuals tend to have a negative bias in interpreting emotional expressions, especially those with an ambiguous nature (Heimberg, Brozovich, & Rapee, 2014).

In the current study we used adaptation to quantify how individuals high in social anxiety process emotional information in a face. We expected stronger adaptation to positive compared to negative emotions, and weaker adaptation to angry versus sad faces.

METHODS

Procedure
Baseline Adaptation to Happy or Angry Faces

Participants viewed a series of faces morphed along an emotional continuum (i.e., 80%, 40%, 20%, and 10% happy to neutral with complementary morphs in the sad/angry dimension). They judged each face as happy or angry (Exp. 1), or as happy or sad (Exp. 2). After adaptation to 100% happy, angry, or sad faces they judged the same face morphs. We quantified each individual’s pre- and post-adaptation Point of Subjective Equality (PSE), where a face is equally likely perceived as happy or angry (Exp. 1), and happy or sad (Exp. 2).

Determining Social Anxiety Status

We assessed social anxiety status using the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (BFNE) and a follow up phone interview screening. Subjects scoring > 25 were categorized as high in social anxiety.

RESULTS

Adapt Angry Adapt Happy Adapt Sad Adapt Happy
Exp. 1 Exp. 2

Baseline Biases

At baseline, socially anxious individuals perceive faces more negatively. The face they judge neutral has more positive emotion, seen here as a positive PSE.

Post-Adapt Biases

Post-adapt, socially anxious individuals show stronger adaptation to positive than negative emotions. In Exp. 1, the PSE bias is weaker after adaptation to angry compared to adaptation to happy emotions (p = 0.008). In Exp. 2, the PSE is weaker after adaptation to sad compared to happy (p = 0.008).

Perceptual Shift (Adaptation Effect)

When the change in PSE is normalized for each individual based on their unique PSE baseline, there is a tendency for a weaker magnitude (independent of effect direction) of adapting to angry versus happy faces (Exp. 1: 4 p < .05), with no tendency for a weaker magnitude of adapting to sad versus happy faces. (Exp. 2: p < .03).}

CONCLUSION: Adaptation is weaker for negative vs positive emotions in socially anxious individuals.

- As expected, socially anxious individuals demonstrate a weaker adaptation to negatively compared to positively charged emotional faces. When normalized by individual biases, the strength of adaptation tends to be larger for angry compared to happy emotional information.

- Socially anxious individuals might maintain their negative bias in interpreting social situations and judging emotional information due to a dysfunctional mechanism of adaptation: either weakened adaptation to negative emotions or strengthened adaptation to positive emotions. Future work would need to distinguish between these possibilities.

Sample References:

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