
Is the enhancement of attentional allocation in social anxiety specific to emotional stimuli? Evidences for a generalized disruption of perceptual processes.

Mandy Rossignol^{*†1}, Virginie Peschard¹, and Pierre Philippot¹

¹Psychopathologie et Neurosciences, Institut de Psychologie, Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) – 10 Place du Cardinal Mercier 1348 Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgium

Abstract

The capacity to respond efficiently and accurately to emotions displayed on faces is necessary to ensure smooth social interactions in everyday life. However, different psychological disorders are characterized by important deficits in the recognition of emotional faces. In particular, individuals with high social anxiety show enhanced automatic vigilance to faces, indexed by higher amplitudes of early ERP components as the P1. However, P1 enhancements have been reported for negative faces but also for happy and neutral faces. One may suggest that all categories of faces represent a potential threat in social anxiety. Alternatively, another theory postulates a generalized hypervigilance to visual stimuli in social anxiety, which would extent to other categories of stimuli, even non-emotional. In that context, we conducted two studies assessing the specificity vs. generalization of enhanced visual processing in social anxiety (SA). In a first study, an emotional Stroop paradigm was proposed to SA participants who had to name the emotional expression (anger, happiness, neutrality) of faces (explicit processing) or the color of a mask superimposed on them (implicit processing). In a second study, SA participants were asked to detect targets succeeding to emotional faces, human postures, or everyday-life objects. In both studies, SAD demonstrated enlarged P100 for all visual stimulation, suggesting a generalization of the phenomenon of increased visual processing in social anxiety. These results will be discussed within the framework of the recent models of anxiety and the phenomenon of emotional regulation.

*Speaker

†Corresponding author: mandy.rossignol@uclouvain.be