



Self-esteem vulnerabilities are associated with cued attentional biases toward rejection

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ABSTRACT

Feelings of insecurity, including those related to low self-esteem, have been linked to broad attentional biases toward social rejection. However, people's insecurities are often not broad and all-encompassing but rather are linked to specific self-worth contingency domains. We hypothesized that a person should exhibit a rejection bias primarily when reminded of a self-perceived flaw in an important domain. We adapted the dot probe measure of attentional bias by beginning each trial with a cue word. First, we re-examined a cognitive avoidance pattern documented in previous research and found that socially anxious people exhibited a rejection bias when cued with social competence flaws such as *foolish* (Study 1). Next, we found that low self-esteem was associated with a rejection bias when cued with *failure* (Study 2). Finally, people with specific self-worth contingencies relating to academics (Study 3) and thinness (Study 4) exhibited a rejection bias when cued with *stupid* and *obese*, respectively. Our findings show that attentional biases are particularly likely when a person feels most vulnerable.

1. Introduction

Many people feel insecure about one thing or another. One person might worry about gaining weight; another might feel threatened by the potential for academic underperformance; while another might feel a drop in self-esteem after any small mistake or failure. Crocker and her colleagues have conceptualized these specific types of insecurities as *self-worth contingencies*: domains in which the outcome affects one's self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In Crocker and colleagues' early research they identified seven key sources of self-esteem: approval from others, academic competence, competition, appearance, family support, virtue, and God's love (Crocker et al., 2003). Research has documented that self-worth contingencies can engender a psychological vulnerability due to the fluctuations in self-esteem resulting from failures and successes in specific domains (Crocker, 2002).

Much research on the topic of self-esteem vulnerability in general documents that it is strongly influenced by the expectation of interpersonal rejection (e.g., Leary & Downs, 1995) and the social information processing biases associated with that expectation. Of note, external contingencies (i.e., approval, academics, competition, appearance) are especially rooted in others' evaluations of the self and, as such, self-esteem in these domains tends to be highly dependent on interpersonal acceptance (Crocker et al., 2003; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Ryan & Brown, 2006) – consequently, these external sources of

contingent self-esteem have been linked to heightened psychological vulnerability (Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel, & Biesheuvel, 2010). For example, in one study senior undergraduate students with strong academic contingencies were particularly likely to show decreases in self-esteem on days that they received negative news about their graduate school applications (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). Moreover, the extent to which students base their self-worth on academic competence has been associated with psychological stress responses to school stressors (Ishizu, 2017) and can predict academic performance (Lawrence & Crocker, 2009). In addition, there has been a great deal of research showing that basing self-worth on appearance bestows a vulnerability to many negative outcomes, including eating disorders and body image anxiety (Bardone-Cone, Lin, & Butler, 2017; Clabough, Karpinski, & Griffin, 2008; Rieger et al., 2010; Rieger, Dolan, Thomas, & Bell, 2017).

Given that insecurities of this sort can be mildly or even highly distressing, it is perhaps surprising that not more is known about the social cognitive processes involved, especially since these biased processes can exacerbate a person's feelings of insecurity. For example, cognitive models of anxiety have long recognized the key role of biased information processing patterns in perpetuating anxiety (e.g., Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985). In particular, selective attention is a key process to understand as it represents the first window of social information processing: As a person navigates their social environment, their attention will be selectively biased toward certain types of social

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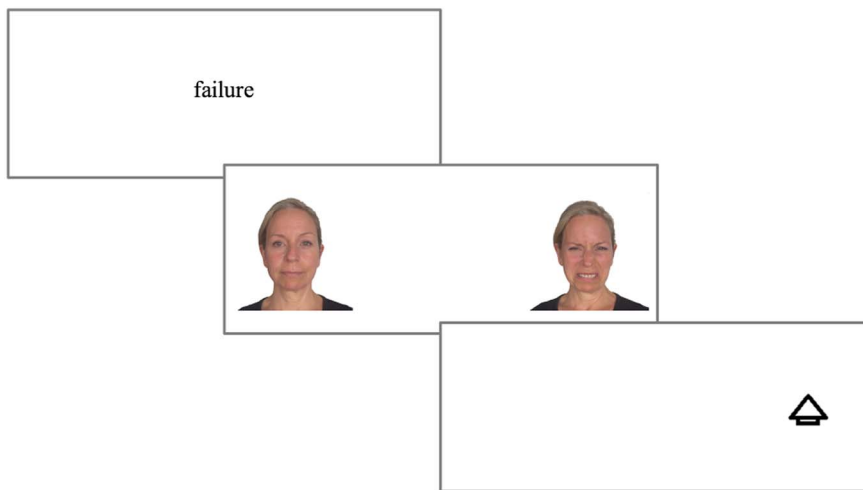


Fig. 1. Example of the cued dot probe task used in Study 2. A faster reaction time on this type of trial where the probe replaces the frown would indicate a stronger *failure-cued rejection bias* (i.e. a stronger attentional bias toward rejection when cued with the word *failure*).

cues. Importantly, some people may have a negative attentional bias, whereby their attention is automatically directed toward any negative social cues instead of being directed to more positive social cues. A robust literature implicates negative attentional biases as playing a significant role in maintaining a range of broad psychological vulnerabilities (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005), as such biases filter the information available for further processing and emphasize any un-supportive and rejecting aspects of one's social experience. Individuals with a relatively high level of general insecurity, for example in the form of social anxiety or chronic low self-esteem, tend to show selective attentional patterns broadly biased toward social threats including rejection (Bantini, Stevens, Gerlach, & Hermann, 2016; Dandeneau, Baldwin, Baccus, Sakellaropoulos, & Pruessner, 2007). Thus, as a person with low self-esteem walks around in their daily lives, their attention is directed to and captured by any sort of rejecting social cues, in turn reinforcing their baseline negative expectation and making them feel even more insecure.

We sought to refine the analysis of attentional biases. Current measures of attentional bias – although useful in picking up general patterns of attention that contribute to broad psychological vulnerabilities – are not nuanced or tailored enough to capture the variation between different types of insecurities an individual might experience. Rather, the implicit assumption seems to be that an insecure person will *always* have their attention biased toward rejecting social cues. In other words, the attentional bias literature to date has failed to acknowledge that individuals surely differ in the specific self-perceived flaws – whether regarding their weight, or social skills, or competence in some important domain – about which they feel insecure (Crocker et al., 2003; Moscovitch, 2009; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Indeed, questionnaire research has shown that when people fail in a specific self-worth contingency domain, they feel less accepted by their significant others (Horberg & Chen, 2010; see also Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). Consistent with this idea, previous social cognitive research has shown that even individuals with chronic low self-esteem do not necessarily always expect to be rejected – rather, low self-esteem individuals are particularly fast to recognize rejection-related words after they have been reminded of *failure* (Baldwin, Baccus, & Fitzsimons, 2004; Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996), presumably due to a specific expectation associating failure with rejection (e.g., “If I fail, then I will be rejected”).

An examination of this type of individual variability is largely missing in the attentional bias literature, in which an individual's attentional orientation is essentially treated as constant and stable. However, research in this area needs to better incorporate the principle that attention is dynamic – meaning that attentional priorities change based on a variety of influences, including expectancies, goals, cues,

and contexts (Ristic & Enns, 2015). As such, it seems likely that the specific context in which a person expects and attends to rejection may differ based on a person's self-esteem concerns. As opposed to assuming that an insecure person will always show a negative bias, it is possible therefore that this bias will arise specifically in contexts where a person's self-esteem can be threatened. Importantly, if attentional biases are evident primarily when a person feels vulnerable, treating a bias as purely a chronic orientation would overlook this important aspect of insecurity. For instance, a person with body weight/shape contingencies of self-worth might show no attentional bias whatsoever throughout the day until suddenly they are trying on bathing suits and are confronted with cues suggesting their body is flawed, leaving them feeling vulnerable to rejection – in contrast, this very same person may not be feeling vulnerable as they sit in class and receive a failing exam grade.

We hypothesized that people should show an attentional bias toward social rejection primarily when reminded of a self-perceived flaw in a self-relevant domain. Specifically, we expected individuals with particular self-worth contingencies to orient toward rejection when cued with failure in that domain. To address this hypothesis we adapted the dot probe task (MacLeod, Mathews, & Tata, 1986), which is the most common, widely-used measure of attentional biases. The standard task involves the presentation of a pair of faces – one emotional (e.g., rejecting) and one neutral – followed by the presentation of a probe. Participants' reaction times to indicate the position of the probe are then recorded. The rationale behind the task is that reaction times will be faster when the probe appears in the location of the face that the person was already attending to (MacLeod et al., 1986). A typical finding with this task is that insecure (e.g., anxious or low self-esteem) individuals tend to show relatively faster reaction times to probes replacing a threatening or rejecting face, indicating a hypervigilance toward social rejection (i.e., a rejection bias). Our modified approach involved presenting a cue word at the beginning of every dot probe trial (see Fig. 1). This cue word was chosen to either reflect or not reflect an individual's self-perceived flaw, with the prediction that rejection biases would be evident primarily on flaw-cued trials.

In Study 1, we addressed an earlier study by Helfinstein, White, Bar-Haim, and Fox (2008), which used an approach similar to ours but found results opposite to our predictions: Their study found that people with higher social anxiety actually showed a greater attentional *avoidance* of rejection – that is, attention *away from* rejection – when dot probe trials were cued with social threat words. We reanalyzed their data by isolating those trials with cue words relating to self-perceived flaws and analyzing them separately from trials with cue words relating to other components of social anxiety. In Study 2, we aimed to test our hypothesis using our own adapted dot probe task by assessing whether

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