

The Impact of Mild Depression on Evaluative Language Cognition and Social Interactive Behavior Based on Eye-Tracking Experiment

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ABSTRACT

Verbal communication with evaluative characters of different emotional valence occurs often in our daily social interaction. Generally, positive evaluative language involving praise and appreciation triggers social approach whereas negative evaluative language involving criticism and censure triggers social avoidance. Differently, individuals with depression may display distorted social behavior due to their excessive sensitivity to negative evaluative language but blunt to positive information. Based on the eye-tracking experiment, this study employs an evaluative movie watching task to investigate the influence of depression-induced negatively-biased processing for evaluative language on gaze to evaluation-givers' eyes. The results suggest that negative self-schema in depressed individuals contributes to their excessive sensitivity to negative evaluative language, which leads to their avoidance behavior in response to social criticism. The findings have great implications for understanding social dysfunctions in individuals with depressive symptoms.

KEYWORDS

Evaluative Language, Mild Depression, Attention Control, Eye Contact, Eye-Tracking

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the day, people use language to communicate about themselves and others. Evaluative aspects of language allow them to convey their feelings and opinions of people and events around them, both positive and negative (Martin, 2020). In doing so, the words and phrases people choose to evaluate reflect the value system of the speakers and their community (Hunston&Thompson, 2000). As social animals, being part of a group and maintaining relations with others is crucial for humans' survival (Holt, 2018). Negative evaluative language involving criticism and disapproval is therefore a painful experience across cultures (Eisenberger& Lieberman, 2004; Fiske&Yamamoto, 2005). In contrast, positive evaluative language involving praise and approval is universally satisfying. On the other hand, the affective processes through which individuals interpret social evaluation regulate their motivation behavior during social interaction with positive emotions facilitating social approach behavior while negative emotions reinforcing social avoidance behavior (Liu & Gao, 2012). Rather than passively accepting personal feedback from social others, people with good mental health tend to frame self-images associated with being competent and possessing socially desirable attributes,

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preferentially engaging in positive social evaluation while avoiding negative information (Greenwald, 1980; Young et al., 2020) . Moreover, they can regulate criticism-induced thoughts and feelings to protect their self-esteem and maintain emotional well-being (Vanderhasselt et al., 2015). However, social feedback processing and concurrent affective responses are hardly uniform across individuals, particularly for individuals with depression.

Clinically and sub-clinically depressed populations are characterized by altered processing of social feedback. They show decreased anticipation and enjoyment for positive social feedback and when receiving one, they hardly perceive cues of acceptance and belonging in such feedback (Evraire & Dozois, 2011) . Instead, they are highly sensitive to negative social feedback, tending to anticipate negative feedback from others, attribute these negative outcomes to themselves, and display amplified negative affective responses afterward (Cuellar & Johnson, 2009; Joiner & Coyne, 1999; Joiner & Katz, 1999) . Such distorted processing and perception of positive and negative social evaluation is inline with the cognitive model of depression which posits that individuals with depression are characterized by a negatively-biased cognition in all aspects of information processing including memory, interpretation, and attention, particularly attention, through which sensory information enters our conscious experiences (Beck, 2008). Thus, impairments of goal-directed attention may have downstream effects on other functions (Keller et al., 2019) . However, till now, little is known about how attention to evaluative words of different valence differs between individuals with and without depression.

On the other hand, the affective and cognitive profiles associated with depression during evaluative interaction have profound effects on depressed people's social dysfunctions, resulting in decreased approach and increased avoidance during social interaction (Hames et al., 2013). Indeed, the aberrant approach and avoidance decisions are consistent with previous findings about motivational processes in depression which propose that approach deficits may help to account for many features of depression, such as feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and anhedonia, as well as loss of energy, and this may be due to an associated reduction in or absence of positive experiences. Avoidance in depression may also removes individuals from sources of positive reinforcements and limits exposure to positive experiences, potentially contributing to anhedonia and negative information processing biases. Nevertheless, little is known about how altered feedback processing and concurrent affective responses in depression influence depressed people's motivation behavior during social interaction. Given that social feedback is one of the most important social information in human communications and appropriate processing of social feedback helps keeping a benign social relationship with other people, it is crucial to understand depression in a social interaction context with feedback provided by others.

This study aimed to investigate biased attention to evaluative words of different valence in depression and its influence on social motivation behavior during social interaction. Given that direction of gaze has been implicated in signaling approach and avoidance tendencies (Adams & Kleck, 2005; Hietanen et al., 2008), direct and averted eye gaze to the evaluation-provider's eyes have been considered as the listeners'social approach and social avoidance behavior, respectively. We recruited undergraduates with and without mild depressive symptoms (categorized by Beck Depression Inventory) and engaged them in watching others giving evaluative speech towards them to compare the differences between them in their attitude towards and eye contact with the different evaluators during social interaction.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Base on the research aims, the study carries out the research in the following steps.

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