

# Thesis proposal on attentional control and automatic attention to emotion

[Health & Medicine](#), [Stress](#)



## Introduction

Attentional control has been a constant source of interest for psychologists in order to determine the relation between this phenomenon and attentional bias. The significance in determining the threat sources that can lead to attentional bias resides in the fact that attentional bias is considered to be the cause of anxiety. Based on Derryberry & Reed's study, "Anxiety-Related Attentional Biases and Their Regulation by Attentional Control", this paper presents a thesis proposal that will aim to illustrate how attentional control contributes to anticipating the potential stress factors that might be responsible for the development of anxiety.

Primarily the discussion should start with a closer look at the attention phenomenon. According to researchers, while focusing on particular elements with consciousness and control, one sets himself/herself to let other elements behind. This is how the psychologist William James defines attention, but there are other opinions that other psychologists formed regarding this cognitive phenomenon. As such, Shiffrin perceives it as referring to the totality of aspects that human cognition controls, but also to the totality of elements upon which the cognition has limited resources, with the aim of challenging those constraints (in Styles, 2006).

Where attention stops, the selective attention begins. As such, while focusing on a single aspect, the other surrounding elements are being ignored, or the subjects are unaware of them. "The cocktail party problem", as scholars defined it, implies being involved in different actions at the same time, but only acknowledging one (Styles, 2006). "The process of selecting from among the many potential available stimuli is the clearest

manifestation of selective attention” (Pashler, 1999, p. 37).

Selective attention is in close relation to attentional bias, but whereas the first is intentional, the second is involuntarily, determining individuals to focus on elements that might possess a threat information potential (Derryberry & Reed, 2002; Pashler, 1999).

Focusing too much on a particular aspect can have a negative impact upon vulnerable or distressed individuals. In this case, because of the association of the element of focus with a negative aspect in the individual’s lives, the emotional Stroop effect appears. The emotional Stroop task, specific to the Stroop effect represents the relation between depression or anxiety and slow response to words/color association test (Williams, Mathews & MacLeod, 1996). As such, during various tests, the depressed respondents have the task of associating various words with colors. It was observed a difficulty for them in identifying the colors for words with negative connotation, as the time needed for this task was longer than for non - clinical respondents, hence, it was considered that the emotional Stroop task focused on the slow response of the subjects in relation to the emotional relevance of the uttered words (Pashler, 1999).

There have been studied whether the emotional Stroop task can answer for the cause or the preservation of the anxiety. As such, people need more time to express the color of certain words, even if they are deeply acquainted with them and even if they are not depressed. Pashler exemplifies this by stating that the ornithologists are slow in identifying the color of the birds, when their names appear printed. This is because, as the author interprets, the great interest of the subjects regarding a specific aspect turns into an estate

of anxiety, which causes a delay in their answer (1999).

Increased stress is considered to be the cause of fear and anxiety, being associated with attentional bias (Clark & Beck, 2010) and pursuing the ongoing utterance or exposing the anxious subjects to the source of stress (the words with negative connotation that causes distress for them) would lead to a preservation of anxiety and to posttraumatic stress symptoms (Bardeen & Orcutt, 2011).

Therefore, anxiety is a form of fear, more often associated with stress, or panic, which is recognized by various symptoms such as tense muscles, trembling, nausea, heart palpitations, sweating, lack of air and inability to breath, which can easily lead towards cardio - vascular attacks or heart attacks (" What is Anxiety?"; Calrk & Ceck, 2010).

Cognitive bias, as the name implies, represents a deviation of attention and of cognition, of judgment, which occurs as a result of a stress factor, which generates panic, fear, which are elements distress, associated with emotions. There are various types of cognitive biases. Whereas some affect the decision - making processes, other generates illusions upon the rationality, while other affects the motivation of individuals, generating the egocentric bias (Hoorens, 1993).

The emotions are also manifested through attention bias, which is a form of cognitive bias. Attention bias could be similar to a lack of attention or distraction, because it occurs when people do not take into consideration multiple consequences when making a decision or a judgment, based on a sum of associations. Attention bias implies the loss of competence of controlling the processing or the thinking ability (Styles, 2006).

Derryberry and Reed propose a discussion about the self - reported attentional control phenomenon, which allows individuals to regulate attentional biases and cure their emotions and anxiety (2002).

Unlike attentional bias, attentional control represents the subjects' ability to choose what they want to pay attention to. This automatically implies a control over what they choose to ignore, being conscious that they have left the neglected elements in the second plan of their focus. Nonetheless, as researchers identify, the attentional control is limited by several factors such as the working memory load, the amount of control required in a task (Styles, 2006) and to this there can be also added the amount and complexity of tasks and the vulnerability of individuals on various tasks. According to Derryberry and Reed, the attentional control may act as a defense mechanism against the stress factors that generate anxiety, through developing the sense of anticipatory attention, meant to predict the threat information and generate various ways of acting for coping with these information (2002).

## References

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