The effect of others' performance and self-regulatory focus on "choking under pressure"

Kanae OGASAWARA

People's performances are influenced by observing another person engaging in the same task. We conducted two experimental studies in order to uncover how others' performance would affect the speaker's psychological and physiological responses and self-evaluation of performance during a speech. In Study 1, we investigated how watching another's performance and their self-regulatory focus would affect psychological and physiological responses during a public speech. Participants were asked to observe other person's speech performance (good or poor) before they actually had a similar speech. After that, they delivered a two-minute speech. We used the General Arousal Check List as a psychological index and measured heart rate and skin conductance level as physiological indices before/during/after the speech. After the speech task, their performance was evaluated by themselves using the Speech Anxiety Scale for University Students. Self-regulatory focus of participants was also questioned using the Japanese version of the Promotion/Prevention Focus Scale. The results showed that the prevention-focused people were more affected when they observed the failure of another person than promotion-focused people. We interpreted that the prevention-focused people are more susceptible to another's failure because they pay more attention to other people than the promotion-focused people do. If so, we can deter prevention-focused people from being affected by another's failure by diverting their attention from other people back to themselves. In Study 2, we investigated whether the direction of attention to self or toward other people during the observation of another person's speech would reduce the effect of observed failure on their own performance. Participants were assigned to one of two groups: self-attention or other-attention. The apparatus to measure psychological and physiological indices were almost the same as Study 1 except for one to measure heart rate. The procedure was also almost the same as Study 1 except that we used only the failure video in Study 1, the theme of the speech task was changed, and that each instruction was provided to manipulate participants' attentions before watching the video. The results showed that prevention-focused speakers in the other-attention condition were more likely to choke under pressure, and they also rated their performance lower than those in the self-attention condition. We concluded that directing self-attention is an effective strategy used to manage the negative influence of another person's failure on one's own performance.