



The connection between disgust and obsessions and compulsions in a non-clinical sample

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Abstract

Although obsessive-compulsive patients (OCD) frequently report thoughts and compulsions about dirt and contamination, there is scarce evidence for a relationship between disgust and OCD. This study investigates whether there is a specific relationship between obsessive symptoms and disgust, independently of general psychological distress symptoms. We tested 278 non-clinical volunteers, through the Disgust Scale [Haidt, J., McCauley, C., & Rozin, P. (1994). Individual differences in sensitivity to disgust: a scale sampling seven domains of disgust elicitors. *Personality Individual Differences*, 16, 701–713], the Padua Inventory — Revised [PI-R; van Oppen, P., Hoekstra, R. J., & Emmelkamp, M. G. (1985). The structure of obsessive-compulsive symptoms. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 33, 15–23], the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory [Spielberger, C. D., Gorsuch, R. L., Lushene, R., Vagg, P. R., & Jacobs, G. A. (1983). *Manual for the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Form Y)*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press], and the Beck Depression Inventory [Beck, A. T., & Steer, R. (1987). *Beck depression inventory scoring manual. The psychological corporation*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich]. A multiple regression analysis showed a significant positive relationship between disgust and obsessive symptoms, after controlling for gender, age, anxiety, and depression. Washing and checking behaviors were best predicted by disgust, while impulses and rumination were best predicted by anxiety and/or depression. These findings are in line with the hypothesis of a specific relationship between disgust and at least some kinds of obsessive symptoms. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Disgust; Obsessive-compulsive disorder; Padua Inventory-Revised, Anxiety; Depression

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1. Introduction

Power and Dalgleish (1997) have suggested that, since patients with obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD) frequently report obsessional thoughts about dirt and contamination (Rachman & Hodgson, 1980), disgust might be implicated in the genesis and maintenance of OCD. In contrast to the traditional and current classification of obsessions and compulsions, some forms of OCD might be primarily based on disgust rather than on fear and anxiety. Based on thought and behavior contents, Phillips, Senior, Fahy and David (1998) argued that cleaning disorders are strictly related to disgust, and checking disorders to anxiety, while Power and Dalgleish (1997) proposed that also checking disorders may be linked to disgust.

The evidence for a relationship between disgust and OCD is supported by clinical observations (e.g. Tallis, 1996) and by several empirical studies. For example, OCD patients show a selective impairment in recognizing facial expressions of disgust (Sprengelmeyer et al., 1997). Sensitivity to disgust is positively correlated with the washing sub-scale of the Maudsley Obsessive Compulsive Inventory (Ware, Jain, Burgess, & Davey 1994).

Furthermore, there is neuropsychological and neuroimaging evidence of abnormalities in the fronto-striatal regions in OCD (Abruzzese, Ferri & Scarone, 1997; McGuire, 1995; Rapaport, 1989). Patients show an increased metabolism and blood flow in orbito-frontal and striatal regions (Breiter & Rauch, 1996). These regions may be involved in the emotion of disgust (Gray, Young, Barker & Curtis, 1997; Sprengelmeyer et al., 1996, 1997).

In the present study, we investigated whether there is a specific relationship between obsessive symptoms and disgust in a non-clinical population, independently of general psychological distress symptoms (i.e. anxiety and depression). Our aim was to test the hypothesis that the emotion of disgust is substantially related to obsessions and compulsions, and to assess the possibility to discriminate different kinds of obsessions and compulsions based on the perception of disgust.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The sample included 278 volunteers (100 males and 178 females), aged 19–58 (mean = 25.5; S.D. = 8), recruited from central Italy. Eighty-four per cent of the subjects had completed at least the high school.

2.2. Measures

Subjects were requested to fill in the following tests in a balanced sequence.

2.2.1. Disgust scale

The Disgust Scale (DS; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994) consists of 32 items measuring attitudes toward seven domains of disgust elicitors: Food, Animals, Body products, Sex, Envelope Violations, Death, and Hygiene. In addition, there is an eighth scale referring to the domain of

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