



## PHOBIC BELIEFS: DO COGNITIVE FACTORS PLAY A ROLE IN SPECIFIC PHOBIAS?

SUSAN J. THORPE and PAUL M. SALKOVSKIS

University of Oxford, Department of Psychiatry, Warneford Hospital, Oxford OX3 7JX, England

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**Summary**—It has long been assumed that specific phobias are by definition, non-cognitive and irrational. However, current cognitive theory suggests that idiosyncratic cognitions may be primary to the experience of phobic anxiety. In this study, conscious beliefs related to exposure to phobic stimuli were assessed. It was found that the majority of specific phobics reported high levels of belief in at least one of a set of cognitions, such as “I would go mad”. Analysis of the relationship between phobic anxiety, avoidance, interference and harm cognitions suggests a major role in phobias for harm cognitions as opposed to the other variables. These results appear to indicate that it is difficult to justify the assumption that the nature of specific phobias is essentially non-cognitive.

### INTRODUCTION

According to cognitive theories of emotion (Beck, 1976; Rachman 1978; Salkovskis 1988, 1991), beliefs concerning threat and danger play a central role in the maintenance of anxiety. Essentially, it is hypothesised that people who suffer from anxiety problems tend to perceive certain situations in their environment as dangerous, where non anxious people do not. This environment may be predominantly internal (as in panic disorder), external (as in specific phobia) or both (as in panic disorder with agoraphobia).

This general hypothesis has been important in the development of models of, and treatment for, anxiety problems (Beck, Emery & Greenberg, 1985; Rachman, 1990), panic (Clarke, 1986), hypochondriasis (Warwick & Salkovskis, 1989), generalised anxiety disorder (Butler & Mathews, 1983) and obsessional disorders (Salkovskis & Warwick, 1988; Salkovskis & Westbrook, 1989; Rachman, 1993).

The cognitive-behavioural hypothesis has resulted in a particularly effective synthesis of older behavioural treatments with the more recently developed cognitive approaches. Treatment is guided by the collection and formulation of the interaction between idiosyncratic beliefs, attention, memory and behaviours. These factors are said to be important in the *maintenance* of anxiety responses. Cognitive factors have not until recently had much impact on the *treatment* of specific phobias and this has been due in part to Seligman's (1971) influential assertion that specific phobias are “non-cognitive”, relating this to the hypothesis that phobias are an example of evolutionarily prepared learning, and as such not subject to conscious control or knowledge. According to Seligman, phobic fear “is by definition not readily inhibited by rational means” and “prepared conditioning is not readily modified by information” (Seligman, 1971, p. 316). The widely accepted conclusion was therefore that cognitive elements would not be helpful in the treatment of specific phobias. Surprisingly, there are little data which address this issue. Furthermore, the relatively easy modification of fear responses by the transmission of information does not sit well with the theory that cognitive factors are irrelevant.

This view of the unimportance of cognitive factors in the aetiology and maintenance of specific phobias has remained influential in some quarters, despite experimental and clinical findings which have failed to support predictions derived from the preparedness hypothesis (McNally, 1987). More recently, evidence has emerged in support of the view that the *beliefs* of specific phobics may be important in the maintenance of their anxiety (Rachman & Bichard, 1988). Data from treatment studies such as those by Öst, Sterner and Fellanius (1989) and Öst, Salkovskis and Hellström (1991) indicate that therapeutic change is unlikely to be due to exposure alone. The most plausible explanation of such findings is that threat-related beliefs are playing an important role in the

maintenance of anxiety responses. This is consistent with the view that belief change, rather than habituation to a repeated presentation of a stimulus, is the main mechanism mediating the effectiveness of exposure (Foa & Kozak, 1986; Salkovskis, 1991).

Research into the role of conscious cognitive factors in the maintenance of anxiety responses has generally been focused on beliefs to do with the risk perceived as associated with the situation. An important example of this is the work on over-prediction of both the frequency of the incidence of aversive events (Butler & Mathews, 1983) and the overprediction of fear itself (Rachman & Bichard, 1988). In specific phobias there has been a tendency to accept the view that fears are non-cognitive and irrational and because of the 'self-evident fact' that slugs, mice, rats, spiders and other common phobic objects cannot inflict harm in humans. This view fails to take into account that 'objectively' the beliefs of panic patients, social phobics and other anxious patients are 'irrational' when the person is *not* anxious.

Rachman and Bichard (1988) examined the relationship between predicted and actual fear experiences in phobic Ss repeatedly confronting aversive events. Claustrophobic volunteers were asked to enter a small enclosed space several times. Their anxiety levels were obtained on each occasion, particularly levels immediately before entry. Anxious Ss consistently overpredicted the fear associated with their phobic situation, and these overpredictions were particularly likely to follow underpredictions. Reductions in fear were most likely to follow overpredictions, but there was evidence of an inherent bias towards the overprediction of subsequent anxiety and pain (i.e., the belief that the next time will be worse). Avoidance behaviour follows from this overprediction of anxiety itself. That is, it is argued that beliefs about anxiety itself may be involved in some specific phobias.

McNally and Steketee (1985) evaluated a variety of animal phobics (10 snake, 4 cat, 4 bird, 2 dog, 2 spider) and examined the incidence of distressing stimulus characteristics (movement: 77%, physical appearance: 64%, sound: 27% and touch: 23%) and feared consequences (panic: 91%, physical attack: 41%, insanity: 18%, injury while fleeing: 14% and heart attack: 9% of Ss). A study with dog phobics suggested that an exaggerated, expectation of harm is a factor in the maintenance of fear responses (Di Nardo, Guzy & Bak, 1988) rather than the prior occurrence of an aversive experience *per se*. Of the reported cognitions to do with potential actual harm, the most prevalent appears to be to do with fear of panic responses (though it is not clear whether these differ from the panic responses of panic patients, for whom panic has been shown to mean death, losing control and so on), followed by fear of actual physical harm. The obvious extension of previous work with specific phobias lies in the exploration of the beliefs of phobics when exposed to their feared object or situation.

It is hypothesised that conscious cognitions concerning the phobic object and the person's response to it should be identifiable in phobics and that such cognitions will clarify the logic of phobic problems in a similar way to that in which catastrophic misinterpretations in panic disorder account for panic attacks. That is, if a bird phobic believes that terrible harm will follow from coming into contact with a bird, whether it is in the form of having eyes pecked out or physical harm from the intensity and uncontrollability of the anxiety experienced, it is not surprising that birds should become objects of avoidance. Similarly, it is internally consistent that the same bird phobic should believe that it was his or her safety seeking action (such as hiding) which prevented them from being harmed by the bird or by their anxiety response. Ultimately, the meaning of a bird for a bird phobic is very different to the meaning a bird has for a non-phobic, or to an ornithologist.

In the first study reported here, questionnaires were used to evaluate the presence of those beliefs which the cognitive hypothesis would predict are important in specific phobias, particularly beliefs about physical harm, loss of control and major social catastrophes. Having established their prominence in a sample of mixed specific phobics, a second study evaluated the extent to which same beliefs could be detected when they imagined that a spider was in the room with them. It was predicted that spider phobics would show a similar pattern to that noted in the first experiment, but that the specificity of these beliefs would be demonstrated by the absence of such situationally determined beliefs in the 'other phobics' as well as the non-phobic controls. Finally, the same questionnaires were re-administered in the same session but after the Ss had all been exposed to

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