



The Origins of Specific Phobias in a Mixed Clinical Sample: Classificatory Differences Between Two Origins Instruments

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Abstract — The origins of 41 cases of specific phobia at an outpatient anxiety clinic were investigated. All subjects completed Menzies and Clarke's Origins Questionnaire (OQ) and Öst and Hugdahl's Phobic Origins Questionnaire (POQ). Results for the individual questionnaires were similar to those reported in previous studies. However, a comparison of assignments to origin categories for the two questionnaires showed widely discrepant results. The POQ returned 20 positive responses for classical conditioning, the OQ only 4. By contrast the OQ returned 11 origins as "non-conditioning traumatic event," all of which returned positive responses for classical conditioning on the POQ. A further 18 subjects on the OQ were categorized as "always been this way," the preponderance of these being classified as vicarious or mixed pathway in origin on the POQ. The POQ does not have questions or categories for the nonassociative acquisition of phobias. Other difficulties in the interpretation of POQ-based results are described. It is suggested that use of the POQ in the past has led to a substantial overestimate of frequency of direct conditioning events in onset of the phobic disorders.

Increasingly, collection of information about origins of phobic cases has become a standard part of initial assessment. This information is important to both researcher and clinician alike. It has been argued that different modes of onset may lead to different individual response patterns and result in differential response to standard treatments (Rachman, 1977). Given such hypotheses, it is not surprising that there has been a dramatic growth in studies examining the etiology of the phobic disorders (cf. Menzies & Clarke, 1994).

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Unfortunately, the research effort to date has been plagued by a multitude of methodological problems. In particular, the validity of origins classifications based on Öst and Hugdahl's (1981) Phobic Origins Questionnaire (POQ) has been questioned in a variety of reports (Jones & Menzies, 1995; Kirkby, Menzies, Daniels, & Smith, 1995; Marks, 1987; Mattick, 1987; Menzies & Clarke, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995a). In a recent review of retrospective studies of the origins of phobias, a series of problems associated with the POQ was highlighted, including (a) use of insufficient categories for classification, (b) inadequate definition of direct conditioning, (c) failure to demonstrate the construct or convergent validity of the measure, (d) failure of the measure to establish the affective neutrality of the CS prior to the supposed conditioning event, and (e) failure of the measure to establish the presence of an independent UCS in the original traumatic pairing (Menzies & Clarke, 1994). Particular concern has been raised over the absence of nonassociative categories of acquisition on the POQ. Nonassociative models of phobia suggest that fear may arise in the absence of any previous aversive CS-UCS pairing (cf. Clarke & Jackson, 1983; Marks, 1987; Menzies & Clarke, 1995a). In general terms, it has been suggested that the POQ is biased in favour of associative-learning models of fear and has led to a significant overestimate of the frequency of direct conditioning events in the onset of the phobic disorders (Marks, 1987; Menzies & Clarke, 1995a, 1995b).

This assertion has received recent support in a study comparing POQ-based origins classifications with classifications based on Menzies and Clarke's (1993a) Origins Questionnaire (OQ). Menzies and Clarke's (1993a) measure remains the only origins instrument with demonstrated reliability and validity. In addition, it is the only instrument that includes items designed to detect nonassociative phobic onsets. Kirkby, Menzies, Daniels, and Smith (1995) administered both the POQ and the OQ to 33 spider-phobic patients prior to treatment. The comparison of classifications based on the two instruments showed widely discrepant results. The POQ returned 17 positive responses for classical conditioning, the OQ only 2. Results on the OQ were similar to those obtained by other investigators examining fear of spiders with alternative measures to the POQ (Davey, 1992; Kleinknecht, 1982). Kirkby et al. (1995) conclude that the unusually high proportion of spider-phobia cases attributed to direct conditioning on the POQ reflects an inherent bias to associative learning in this instrument.

To date, the Kirkby et al. (1995) study remains the only report that compares these two popular measures for establishing the origin of phobic cases. As such, conclusions on the differences between the POQ and OQ are limited to spider phobia at this point. The present study sought to extend this work, by examining discrepancies between POQ and OQ-based classifications in a mixed group of specific phobics. In line with the findings of Kirkby et al. (1995), it was hypothesised that the POQ-based classifications would include a significantly higher proportion of classical conditioning than would be

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