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Studies on the role of disgust in the acquisition and maintenance of specific phobias

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Abstract

Disgust has been proposed as a possible factor in phobic acquisition and maintenance, particularly in spider phobia. Cognitions and processes concerning disgust were examined in a series of studies with spider phobics, other specific phobics and nonphobic controls. Beliefs about the disgusting nature of their phobic objects were present in phobics but did not contribute to an attentional bias. Measures of global disgust sensitivity were not closely linked to the phobic fear response. The disgust associated with phobic objects appears to have different constituents to the disgust associated with objects that do not evoke the phobic response. In the light of evidence presented here, it seems unlikely that disgust plays a central role in the aetiology or maintenance of spider phobia in particular and specific phobias in general. It is proposed that when stimuli normally associated with disgust become the focus of phobic anxiety the disgust response may be amplified. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The traditional account of specific phobias has concentrated on the *fear* evoked by phobic objects or situations, rather than other emotional responses. Watts (1986) suggested that *disgust* was important in phobias, particularly spider phobia. He hypothesised that it was disgust rather than anxiety which disrupted spider phobics' memory for spider information (and which therefore interfered with habituation), as indicated by experiments examining biases in their memory for spider stimuli. In a series of papers, Graham Davey and colleagues proposed that the connection between phobias and disgust may have had adaptive value (Matchett and Davey, 1991; Davey, 1992a,b,c, 1994; Davey et al., 1993). He postulated that

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humans are more likely to acquire disgust-based avoidance of stimuli which have been evolutionarily associated with disease or contamination. This is an extension of Seligman (1971) preparedness theory which states that particular classes of stimuli are more likely to be associated with conditioned fear responses due to evolutionary pressures. Seligman particularly cited the conditioned *nausea* response as one which was persistent and very easily acquired, and suggested that this had evolved in mammals because of the need to protect against poisoning. Support for this was to be found in the work of Garcia and colleagues (Garcia and Koelling, 1966; Garcia et al., 1977) who had discovered that taste aversions can be conditioned in a single trial, and that once acquired, this conditioning is particularly long-lasting and difficult to undo. This appears to be true only when there is an evolutionary based 'belongingness' relationship: in the conditioning of taste aversion this means that the CS has to be novel taste (as opposed to auditory and visual stimuli) and the UCS has to be nausea (as opposed to pain). If disgust is involved it is not clear why this type of process should be relevant to phobias, in which the stimuli are usually visual and auditory, and reported conditioning experiences seldom involve nausea. Furthermore, the person who develops a lifelong aversion to shellfish after an episode of food poisoning does not become phobic of mussels.

Rozin and Fallon (1987) were amongst the first to study disgust experimentally and to put it in the context of contamination sensitivity. They describe the disgust reaction as primarily a food-rejection response consisting of nausea, a characteristic facial expression, *a distancing of the self from the offensive object*, a sensitivity to both contamination from the object and the prospect of eating it, and a characteristic feeling-state (revulsion). They were also interested in the question of *contagion*, where an object could subjectively acquire the characteristics of another object by being physically close to it (Rozin et al., 1986) and *similarity*, where this happens when the object looks similar to another. So perhaps the disgust response in phobias is acquired through association in some way as yet unspecified, and this may in part account for the development of the phobic response. In order to examine the question of disgust/contamination sensitivity, Rozin et al. (1984) devised a scale based on how much those participating in the experiment would like to eat a bowl of soup from a dog bowl, stirred by a fly swatter, containing a dead grasshopper and so on (20 items in all). Additionally, they asked them how much they would like to eat a biscuit after a bite had been taken by an acquaintance, a good friend, a waiter in a restaurant or after it had fallen, unbitten, on the lawn while they were picnicking. They demonstrated an association between the perception of contamination, and avoidance of the object.

Evidence for a specific association between the measure of disgust sensitivity and the degree of fear provoked by different classes of animals has come from Matchett and Davey (1991), who found that measures of disgust and contamination sensitivity were correlated with scores on the animal subscale of the Fear Survey Schedule (Wolpe and Lang, 1964). In addition, disgust and contamination sensitivity correlated with fear of animals which were characterised as fear-relevant and *not* physically harmful (camel, rat, eagle, spider, cockroach, maggot, snake) and also correlated with fear of animals characterised as having high revulsion (maggot, cockroach, slug, rat, snake, spider, snail). This contrasted with the lack of correlation with animals they considered to be physically harmful, attacking or predatory (shark, tiger, lion, bear, snake, jellyfish, wolf). It is not clear why snakes should appear in all categories and rat,

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