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Counterconditioning in the treatment of spider phobia: effects on disgust, fear and valence

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Abstract

From the perspective that disgust is a core feature of spider phobia, we investigated whether the treatment efficacy could be improved by adding a counterconditioning procedure. Women with a clinically diagnosed spider phobia ($N = 34$) were randomly assigned to the regular one-session exposure condition (EXP) or to the exposure with counterconditioning condition (CC). In the CC-condition tasty food-items were used during the regular exposure exercises and the participants' favourite music was played. Both treatment conditions appeared very effective in reducing avoidance behaviour and self-reported fear of spiders, strongly attenuated the disgusting properties of spiders and altered the affective evaluations in a positive direction. CC was not more effective in altering the affective valence of spiders than EXP and was not superior with respect to the long term treatment efficacy at 1 year follow up. Apparently, regular exposure treatment is already quite effective in altering the affective-evaluative component of spider phobia and it remains to be seen whether it is possible to further improve treatment outcome by means of procedures which are specifically designed to reduce the spiders' negative affective valence. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There is increasing evidence that disgust and fear of contamination somehow underlie spider phobia. Indirect support for this position is provided by a series of studies demonstrating that common spider fear correlates with disgust sensitivity as indexed by both the Disgust

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Questionnaire (DQ; Rozin, Fallon & Mandell, 1984), a questionnaire which is mainly concerned with food contamination by animal products (Davey, 1992; de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998; Mulkens, de Jong & Merckelbach, 1996), as well as by the Disgust Scale (DS; Haidt, McCauley & Rozin, 1994), which is a broader index of disgust sensitivity covering seven domains of disgust elicitors such as body products, animals and body envelope violations (de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998; Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk & Lee, 1997).

In line with this, women as well as children with a clinically diagnosed spider phobia were found to have higher levels of disgust sensitivity than nonphobic controls (de Jong, Andrea & Muris, 1997; Mulkens et al., 1996; Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998). The higher levels of disgust sensitivity in the phobic groups could not be attributed to higher levels of trait anxiety or neuroticism (de Jong et al., 1997; Mulkens et al., 1996). Furthermore, the repeated finding that DQ scores of spider phobics remain unaffected after successful treatment (de Jong et al., 1997; Merckelbach, de Jong, Arntz & Schouten, 1993) clearly refutes the suggestion that high levels of disgust sensitivity as indexed by the DQ are a mere epiphenomenon of phobic fear (e.g. Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998).

More direct evidence for the relationship between disgust and spider phobia was obtained by Mulkens and colleagues who showed that for spider phobic individuals, spiders share the crucial feature of all disgusting objects, namely that they can render perfectly good food-items inedible by brief contact, even when there is no detectable trace of the offensive item (e.g. Rozin & Fallon, 1987). During a behavioural test only 25% of a spider phobic group eventually ate (some of) a preferred cookie after it had been in short contact with a live spider versus 75% of the nonphobic women (Mulkens et al., 1996). Using an *in vitro* variant of this test, similar results were obtained in spider phobic children (de Jong et al., 1997).

Although it has been argued that this repugnance to eating the favourite food-item is fuelled by fear rather than disgust (e.g. Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998), recent data render this possibility very unlikely. Note that if this would be the case, all phobic stimuli would have similar contaminating properties. Yet, in contrast to spider fearful participants, wasp fearful individuals (who are mainly afraid of being bitten) did not show a significant decline in their motivation to eat their favourite chocolate bar after it had been in brief contact with their phobic object, although the fear levels of both groups were virtually identical (Andrea, 1996). Clearly, these findings refute the idea that the contaminating properties of spiders are merely due to their fear evoking properties.

The idea that disgust plays an important role in spider phobia is further substantiated by the finding that the majority of spider phobic individuals reported that they consider their phobic stimulus (i.e. spider) as their most disgusting item (Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998). Related, Tolin and colleagues (Tolin et al., 1997) demonstrated that the reactions of an analogue group of spider phobics to pictures of spiders were not restricted to fear but consisted of disgust as well. Note however, that during naturalistic confrontations with a spider, the threat of the spider's uncontrollable approach behaviour is likely to outstrip the typical symptoms of disgust such as feelings of dizziness, nausea and fainting. Germane to this possibility, it has been reported that in some individuals with blood-injection-injury phobia the typical (disgust related) vasovagal reaction first appeared after the fear of injections was strongly reduced (Öst, 1985; Trijsburg et al., 1996). Following this, the strong (fear-related) sympathetic activity in spider phobics may outstrip the (disgust-related) increase of parasympathical activity and this may explain why the

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