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Spider phobia

Interaction of disgust and perceived likelihood of involuntary physical contact

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Abstract

After reading vignettes, a group of spider-phobic girls ($n = 18$) and a group of nonphobic girls ($n = 18$) rated the subjective probability of spiders entering their private living space, their tendency to approach and make physical contact, and the subjective probability of spiders doing physical harm. In addition, they indicated their eagerness to eat a favorite food item before as well as after it had been shortly contacted by spiders. In support of the idea that spider phobia results from the convergence of spiders' disgusting properties and the subjective probability of involuntary contact, phobic girls reported relatively high ratings concerning: (a) the probability of spiders entering their room; (b) spiders' tendency to approach and make physical contact; and (c) spiders' disgust-evoking status. Finally, regression analysis indicated that spiders' disgust-evoking status is the single best predictor of spider phobia, whereas the independent contribution of the perceived probability of spiders doing physical harm was found to be negligible. All in all, the present findings strongly support the idea that spider phobia essentially reflects a fear of physical contact with a disgusting stimulus. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Disgust; Disgust sensitivity; Small animal fear; Spider phobia

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1. Introduction

Fear of spiders is very common in nonphobic (e.g., Davey, 1992) and phobic individuals (e.g., Marks, 1987). Spider phobia is characterized by an early age of onset, and adult spider phobia is generally viewed as a typical childhood fear that has persisted and survived adolescence (e.g., Merckelbach, de Jong, Muris, & van den Hout, 1996). Even though serious interference with daily life is evident only in a minority of individuals, it still belongs to one of the most prevalent anxiety disorders (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1994; Robins & Regier, 1991).

In apparent contrast with the efficacy of the available treatments (e.g., Öst, 1989), the underlying mechanisms or causes of spider phobia remain a matter of debate. Virtually all recent psychology textbooks explain the etiology of spider phobia in terms of predator-avoidance processes (e.g., Gleitman, Fridlund, & Reisberg, 1999; Oltmanns & Emery, 1998). Yet, there are several observations that are difficult to reconcile with a predator-defense explanation of spider phobia. First, only a very small minority of current spiders is potentially dangerous to human beings (Renner, 1990), and there is little reason to suspect that this was any different in our prehistoric past. Relatedly, spider-phobic individuals have extreme difficulty in articulating what they actually fear (“they are just creepy animals”). Furthermore, common spider fear covaries with fears of animals that are nearly universally considered disgusting rather than harmful per se, such as maggots and snails (e.g., Davey, 1992). This covariation suggests a common underlying factor, and predator avoidance does not seem to be a particularly convincing candidate for that communality.

To reconcile these apparent inconsistencies, it has been suggested that the core feature of spider phobia may be fear of physical contact with a disgusting stimulus rather than fear of being attacked and getting physically harmed (Davey, 1994). Such a disgust conceptualization of spider fear may also explain the suggestive parallel between age of onset of spider phobia and age at which children start to display disgust responses (Rozin, Hammer, Oster, Horowitz, & Marmora, 1986). Furthermore, it may explain the curious observation that spider-phobic individuals have difficulty in articulating what they fear, as a key feature of disgusting objects is that they are intrinsically offensive (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Finally, a disgust conceptualization of spider phobia may explain the finding that only a minority of spider phobics can recall an aversive conditioning event as the starting point for the development of their phobia (e.g., Merckelbach, Arntz, & de Jong, 1991).

If, indeed, disgust is an important feature of spider phobia, spiders should also share the striking feature of any disgusting substance: namely, that they can render a perfectly good food item inedible by brief contact (even when there is no detectable trace of the offensive item) (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). In support of this, research demonstrated that most spider phobics refused to eat (part of) a preferred cookie after it had been in short contact with a live spider, whereas the motivation

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