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# Domain-specific and generalized disgust sensitivity in blood-injection-injury phobia: The application of behavioral approach/avoidance tasks

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## Abstract

The separate and combined roles of fear and disgust in mediating phobic responding in blood-injection-injury (BII) phobia have generated considerable empirical interest. The present study aimed to replicate previous research regarding fear and disgust responding to phobia-relevant and generalized disgust elicitors, as well as to provide a novel examination of performance on behavioral approach/avoidance tasks (BATs) and the “contaminated cookie” procedure (i.e., willingness to eat a cookie after it has come into brief contact with a threat-relevant stimulus). Fear and disgust responses toward pictures (mutilation, insects) and in vivo stimuli (bloody gauze, severed deer leg, cockroach, worm) were assessed in a sample of analogue BII phobics and nonphobics. Consistent with previous research, BII phobics expressed significantly greater fear and disgust toward phobia-relevant pictures and BAT stimuli, with disgust being the dominant emotional response. We failed to find any between-group differences on disgust responding toward the generalized disgust pictures and BAT stimuli. Results from the BATs suggest that BII phobics were less willing to perform all tasks involving blood stimuli, and less willing to complete the latter stages of the insect BATs. BII phobics were less likely to eat the “contaminated cookie” after it had come into contact with only the insect stimuli.

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Future implications for research examining domain-specific and generalized disgust sensitivity in BII phobia are outlined.

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## 1. Introduction

The separate and combined roles of fear and disgust in blood-injection-injury (BII) phobia have generated considerable interest in the empirical literature (Sawchuk, Lohr, Tolin, Lee, & Kleinknecht, 2000). While both emotions are characterized by avoidance of threat-relevant stimuli (Woody & Teachman, 2000), fear typically involves arousal of the sympathetic nervous system (Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983), whereas disgust evokes parasympathetic arousal (Levenson, 1992; Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993). The potential to experience aversion, nausea, dizziness, and vasovagal syncope upon exposure to blood-injury stimuli has lead various authors to speculate that disgust serves a distinct role in BII phobia (Page, 1994; Rachman, 1990; Tolin, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1999).

Several studies have demonstrated that self-reported disgust among BII phobics is domain specific, characterized by heightened aversion toward mutilation, wounds, injections, and venipunctures. de Jong and Merckelbach (1998) found that measures of blood-injury fear correlated with animal-reminder disgust domains (e.g., envelope violations, death) assessed by the Disgust Scale (DS; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994). This domain-specific disgust reactivity toward blood-injury stimuli has been largely replicated in analogue samples of BII phobics using both the Disgust Emotions Scale (DES; Walls & Kleinknecht, 1996) and DS, when compared to spider phobics (Sawchuk et al., 2000; Sawchuk, Lohr, Westendorf, Meunier, & Tolin, in press; Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1997) and nonphobic (NP) controls (Sawchuk, Lohr, Lee, & Tolin, 1999). A number of studies have also suggested that BII phobics may be characterized by a generalized sensitivity to other classes of disgust elicitors completely unrelated to phobic concerns (e.g., rotting foods, smells, body products). The majority of these studies have found that analogue BII phobics do report significantly greater aversion toward these generalized domains on the DES and DS relative to NPs, although typically no significant between-group differences emerge, when directly comparing BII phobics to spider phobics (Sawchuk et al., 2000, in press; Tolin et al., 1997).

The lack of between-phobia-group differences on generalized disgust domains suggests that generalized disgust sensitivity may serve a role in the onset and maintenance of disgust-related avoidance in small animal and BII phobias. A number of authors have forwarded alternative views regarding the phobia-disgust relationship. Thorpe and Salkovskis (1998) argue that disgust may not be directly

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