

Treatment Context and Return of Fear in Spider Phobia

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Recent research indicates that return of fear occurs when spider-fearful individuals are confronted with the phobic stimulus in a context different than the one used during exposure therapy (Mineka, Mystkowski, Hladek, & Rodriguez, 1999; Rodriguez, Craske, Mineka, & Hladek, 1999). However, limitations regarding fear measurement, lack of real-world context manipulations and statistical power suggest that further investigation is warranted. With these concerns in mind, 46 spider-fearful individuals received a 1-session exposure-based therapy in one of two contexts, and were followed-up 1 week later for fear assessment in the treatment context, as well as in a new context, in a counterbalanced order. Self-report data confirmed the hypothesis that return of fear will appear when individuals are tested for fear in a context different than the treatment context. In addition, changes in perceptions of safety, danger, control, and predictability did not mediate and/or moderate a contextually based return of fear. Limitations of the current study and directions for future study are discussed.

The behavioral treatment most commonly used in the treatment of specific fears and phobias involves repeated and systematic exposure to fear-provoking stimuli. Typically, individuals are placed for prolonged periods in real-life situations (in vivo) that they find frightening (e.g., Foa & Kozak, 1986; Öst, 1997). Graded, exposure-based treatments, which are considered the treatment of choice for specific phobias, involve developing a fear hierarchy based on an individual's reported level of fear of a variety of fear-provoking situations (e.g., Craske & Rowe, 1997; Öst). Then, individuals are encour-

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aged to gradually expose themselves for prolonged periods to their feared situations, from lowest to highest in their hierarchy, so that their fear or anxiety may extinguish. By preventing avoidance at each step of the hierarchy, fear gradually subsides and, though not an explicit goal of exposure therapy, irrational cognitions usually decrease as the individual realizes that he or she is not in any danger (Foa & Kozak).

In addition, many graded exposure treatments utilize participant modeling (Bandura, Blanchard, & Ritter, 1969) where therapists model how to interact with the phobic stimulus (e.g., spider or tarantula) in a controlled and nonfearful manner and then encourage participant imitation for each step. Participant modeling has been shown to increase a sense of self-efficacy, which is a person's belief that he or she can successfully perform important behaviors (Bandura, 1977) and, according to research over the last decade, cope with internal phenomena, such as cognitive and emotional symptoms of fear or anxiety (Bandura et al., 1969; Bandura & Wood, 1989; Barlow, 1988; Mineka & Kelly, 1989).

Although an effective treatment, some of the effects of exposure treatment may only be temporary in that fear may return with the passage of time. According to Rachman (1989), return of fear is the "reappearance of fear that has undergone full or partial extinction." The fear recovery (usually partial and not synonymous with fear relapse), moreover, may emerge either between exposure sessions or after a long follow-up (Rachman).

To date, researchers studying return of fear have explored individual difference variables that predispose certain individuals to return of fear, treatment variables, and posttreatment variables, or events that occur after treatment and before retesting at follow-up. However, research on many of these factors (e.g., state arousal, phobic cognitions, treatment duration, intensity of exposure, and exposure to stressful events following treatment) is mixed regarding their respective influences on return of fear (see Craske, 1999, for a review).

A newly researched factor influencing return of fear, changes in context, has received a great deal of attention in the animal conditioning literature. Bouton and colleagues have demonstrated that rats exhibit a renewal of fear to a CS when fear retention tests occur in a context different than the original extinction, or counterconditioning, context (Bouton, 1988, 1991, 1994; Bouton & Bolles, 1979; Bouton & Nelson, 1998). Similarity between extinction and test contexts, meanwhile, has been shown to prevent or decrease return of fear (Bouton & King, 1983). In general, Bouton's "memory model" states that the learning that takes place during extinction does not replace the learning that took place during acquisition; rather, both types of associations are nonconsciously represented in an organism's memory network and subsequent fear performance depends on the competition between both types of learning. Moreover, when confronted with a context that is novel or different than the one encountered during fear extinction, an organism relies on associations of fear acquisition, rather than fear extinction, leading to fear renewal (Bouton, 1993). Based on the findings of Bouton and colleagues, it may be the case that changes in context affect human phobics when they encounter situations different than the

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