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Behavioral avoidance tests and disgust in contamination fears: distinctions from trait anxiety[☆]

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Abstract

Much of the existing literature examining the role of disgust is limited to specific phobia. Recent research has begun to examine the role of disgust in contamination fear, a subtype of obsessive–compulsive symptoms. Through the use of behavioral avoidance tasks (BATs), the current study was designed to examine the role of disgust in people with contamination fears, with attention to distinguishing high and low trait anxiety. From a large screening of undergraduate students, three groups were formed based on their level of contamination fear and level of trait anxiety: contamination fearful ($n = 12$), high-trait anxiety ($n = 11$), and low trait anxiety ($n = 15$). Subjects were asked to engage in six different BATs corresponding to six domains of disgust (food, animals, body products, body envelope violations, death, and sympathetic magic). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences between the contamination fearful group and the high trait anxiety group on the animal and sympathetic magic BATs. Significant differences on the food, animal, body envelope violations, and death BATs were also found between the contamination fearful group and the low-trait anxious group. The findings modestly support the importance of disgust in contamination fears. Implications for the study of disgust in contamination fear are provided. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

One of the most common types of obsessional thoughts in obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) is the fear of contaminants (Steketee, Grayson & Foa, 1984). The crux of these obsessions is that there exist contaminants, such as germs and viruses, present throughout the environment that can cause harm. The anxiety caused by contamination fears is commonly alleviated by engag-

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ing in excessive washing rituals or by active avoidance of contaminated objects (e.g. handrails; public telephones). This active avoidance behavior has led to comparisons between such contamination fears and specific phobias (Jones & Menzies, 1998; Steketee, Grayson & Foa, 1984). By comparing contamination fear to specific phobias, changes in treatment delivery have resulted (Steketee, 1993). Until recently, the role of disgust has been largely ignored when considering people with contamination fears.

In their seminal article, Rozin and Fallon (1987) characterized disgust as a food-related emotion of oral revulsion with a distinctive physiological expression accompanied by appropriate action. The action associated with disgust is physical distancing oneself from the offensive object, while the distinctive physiological reaction is nausea. Rozin and Fallon (1987) noted that although disgust does have some adaptive function as protection from harmful microbial contaminants, it more frequently results in the rejection of nutritive substances.

Woody and Teachman (2000) reviewed the existing literature on the role of disgust and fear and compared the two constructs regarding their “terminology, functional value, behavioral intentions, physiological processes, and acquisition mechanisms” (pp. 292). The authors noted that while appraisals of fear and disgust may overlap, disgust appraisals are more narrowly focused on contamination rather than general threat. Furthermore, they noted that such fears follow some basic rules of disgust appraisal labeled ‘the laws of sympathetic magic’ (Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990). These rules include the law of contagion, which dictates that the properties of one object are transferred by contact to another and remain after contact is broken. Thus, if a disgusting object were to come in contact with a non-disgusting object, the latter would, from that point on, be considered disgusting as well. Such magical ideation fits well with the clinical profile of many people with contamination fears in OCD. Woody and Teachman (2000) thus hypothesized that individuals with contamination fears would have higher disgust sensitivities (i.e. be more easily disgusted). In addition, they encouraged the use of behavioral avoidance tasks in future research in order to gain more objective data than the often-used self-report questionnaire.

Until recently, the existing literature examined the role of disgust almost exclusively in animal and blood-injury-injection (BII) phobia. Such work has begun to uncover the importance of considering disgust independently of fear. In a two-part study, Ware, Jain, Burgess and Davey (1994) examined the role of disgust in animal fears. Through factor analysis of previous studies examining animal phobia, they found disgust sensitivity to be significantly correlated with fear-evoking, but physically harmless animals (e.g. rat, spider, slug) and not with predatory animals likely to physically attack humans (e.g. tiger, lion, alligator). In addition, the authors found a significant correlation between the washing subscale of the Maudsley obsessive-compulsive inventory (MOCI) and disgust sensitivity. These results indicate that disgust plays a significant role in the fear of particular animals in that certain fear-relevant animals are avoided because of their disgusting nature and not their perceived physical threat.

In another study, Sawchuk, Lohr, Lee and Tolin (1999) investigated the role of disgust in blood-injection-injury phobia. Through the use of a word stem completion task, the authors found that BII phobic participants demonstrated an implicit memory bias for disgust-relevant words. The authors note that this finding is consistent with work conducted on other anxiety disorders.

Two recent publications have proposed an increasingly important role of disgust in OCD. Muris et al. (2000) examined the relationship between disgust sensitivity and several types of psychopathology. Specifically, the authors examined the correlation between the disgust sensitivity ques-

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