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Disgust sensitivity as a function of the Big Five and gender

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Abstract

Relationships among disgust sensitivity, the Big Five, and gender were explored using a sample of 132 men and women undergraduates. Results indicated that disgust sensitivity does vary according to gender, which is consistent with previous research, with women reporting greater sensitivity to disgust stimuli than do men. The data also supported the hypothesized positive relationship between neuroticism and disgust sensitivity as well as a negative relationship between openness to experience and disgust sensitivity. In addition, positive relationships were found between two other Big Five factors (Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) and disgust sensitivity. These results suggest that a better understanding of the disgust sensitive individual may come about by studying accompanying personality characteristics. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words: Disgust; Emotion; Personality; Gender; NEO

1. Introduction

In the most general sense the term disgust is defined to mean “a marked aversion aroused by something highly distasteful” (Webster, 1992). Due to the fact that ‘distasteful’ embodies both an objective and subjective assessment, disgust as it pertains to this research should be understood as including but not limited to a subjective reaction based on fears of physical or psychological incorporation of the disgust stimulus. Darwin (1872/1965) was perhaps the first to recognize disgust as “something revolting, primarily in relation to the sense of taste, as actually perceived or vividly imagined; and secondarily to anything that causes a similar feeling, through the sense of smell,

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touch or even eyesight” (p. 253). Angyal (1941) furthered the discussion on disgust by postulating that at the core of the human disgust reaction was a threat of oral incorporation. Most recently the available research on disgust reactions has focused on factors which may be associated with the perception of an object as disgusting (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). These studies (Haidt, McCauley & Rozin, 1994; Rozin & Fallon, 1987) have focused on the inappropriate nature of the stimulus such as the eating of an object not designated as food (paper, rocks, etc.) or the acknowledged inherent danger associated with the incorporation of the object (i.e. poison mushrooms). What has been determined is that there are certain characteristics of disgust stimuli which in turn affect the severity of the disgust response in humans. Perhaps most importantly, this research has culminated in an understanding that the disgust reaction serves as both psychological and physiological defense mechanisms.

Research on disgust reactions has only recently taken into consideration the role which the participant’s personality and gender may play in determining the disgust reaction (Quigley, Sherman & Sherman, 1997; Wronska, 1990). There is reason to believe that as a phenomenological experience, the individual response to a disgust stimulus will vary in relation to gender and personality characteristics. The research of Rozin and his associates regarding disgust and disgust sensitivity becomes paramount to the conceptualization of a psychological profile for a disgust sensitive individual. Rozin’s years of research on the subject of disgust (Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Millman & Nemeroff, 1986; Rozin & Nemeroff, 1990) has culminated in the 32-item Disgust Scale (Haidt et al., 1994). By creating the Disgust Scale to measure disgust sensitivity, Haidt et al. (1994) provided the means by which researchers could quantify disgust reactions and thus begin a systematic examination of variables related to them. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Disgust Scale (Haidt et al., 1994) is the ability of the scales’ non-incorporative items to elicit a response comparable to those of incorporative items. Specifically the ingestion of spoiled milk held the same item weight as did questions regarding incest or bodily dysfunction/disfigurement. Overall, it appears that factors that are ‘inherent’ within the individual may add a measure of unpredictability in analysing the disgust reaction. Therefore, the question becomes what characteristics of the individual ‘produce’ a particular response to a disgust stimulus?

Despite the extent of the past research on the subject of disgust, it has only been recently entertained that personality and gender play a role in disgust sensitivity. For example, Haidt et al. (1994) reported a positive correlation between disgust sensitivity and neuroticism, and a negative correlation between disgust sensitivity and psychoticism as measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975; EPQ). Haidt et al. (1994) also found gender to be the most powerful predictor of disgust sensitivity with women scoring as much as one standard deviation higher on disgust sensitivity than did men. Furthermore, in the development of their scale to measure attitudes about body products and body elimination, Templer, King, Brooner and Corgiat (1984) found that women showed stronger negative attitudes towards body products and these stronger negative attitudes were correlated positively with high measures of neuroticism and obsessiveness for women.

An implication of these findings is that the reaction to a disgust stimulus is much more than the product of an oral incorporative threat (biological threat) and is at the very least the product of socio-cultural conditioning and psychological functioning. Perceived contamination of an object is the product of both objective and subjective assessments of stimuli. A subjective assessment of contamination is the product of any number of psychological functions which operate to protect

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