



The structural relation between disgust sensitivity and blood–injection–injury fears: A cross-cultural comparison of US and Dutch data

Bunmi O. Olatunji^{a,*}, Craig N. Sawchuk^b, Peter J. de Jong^c,
Jeffrey M. Lohr^d

^a*Department of Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School, 15 Parkman Street, ACC 812, Boston, MA 02114, USA*

^b*University of Washington School of Medicine, USA*

^c*University of Groningen, The Netherlands*

^d*University of Arkansas, USA*

Abstract

A growing body of literature has implicated the role of disgust sensitivity in blood–injection–injury (BII) phobia. The present study sought to extend this line of research by investigating the structural relation between Rozin et al.'s [(2000). *Disgust*. In M. Lewis, J.M. Haviland (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions*. New York: Guilford Publications.] theoretical model of core and animal reminder disgust as they relate to BII fears in US ($N = 162$) and Dutch ($N = 260$) samples. Using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the hypothesized relation between the theoretical model of disgust and BII fears demonstrated good model fit in both samples. Consistent with previous findings on the differential relation between core and animal reminder disgust and BII fears [de Jong, P. J., & Merckelbach H. (1998). Blood–injection–injury phobia and fear of spiders: Domain specific individual differences in disgust sensitivity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 24, 153–158], structural equation modeling (SEM) provided support for a domain specific relationship in both samples: animal reminder disgust was specifically related to the BII latent factor, whereas core disgust was not. The clinical and research implications regarding the relationships between disgust and BII fears across cultures are discussed. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Disgust; Blood–injection–injury; Cross-cultural; Core; Animal reminder; Fear

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 617 724 5600; fax: +1 617 726 8907.
E-mail address: bolatunji@partners.org (B.O. Olatunji).

1. Introduction

Blood–injection–injury (BII) phobia is characterized by extreme aversion upon exposure to blood, mutilation, venepunctures, or various medical procedures, affecting up to 3.0% in the general population (Fredrikson, Annas, Fischer, & Wik, 1996). In contrast to other phobic states, BII phobic reactivity appears mediated primarily by disgust as opposed to fear (Page, 1994; Rachman, 1990). A range of experimental studies have provided support for the prominence of disgust responding when analogue BII phobics are exposed to phobic-relevant stimuli (e.g., Lumley & Melamed, 1992; Olatunji, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Westendorf, 2005; Sawchuk, Lohr, Westendorf, Meunier, & Tolin, 2002; Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1997). Aversive conditioning paradigms have also shown that BII fearful subjects selectively associate blood transfusion slides with a disgust-relevant UCS (drinking a nauseating drink) more so than a fear-relevant UCS (electrical shock; de Jong, van Hout, & Peters, 2004).

Elevated disgust responses are not simply limited to BII-related stimuli. Converging evidence has demonstrated that BII fearful individuals report high levels of disgust when exposed to pictures and videos depicting stimuli unrelated to their phobic concerns, such as maggots and larvae, raw sewage, rotting foods, and bodily products (Sawchuk, Lohr, Lee, & Tolin, 1999; Sawchuk et al., 2002). Similarly, Schienle, Stark, and Vaitl (2001) demonstrated that compared to controls, individuals high in BII fears rated disgusting but fear-irrelevant pictures as more disgusting and showed stronger facial expressions of disgust as assessed by electromyographic activity (EMG). Some theorists have argued that BII phobics are characterized by a “generalized” sensitivity to disgust, or a stronger propensity to experience disgust, which may serve as an etiological vulnerability factor (de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998; Page, 1994). The potential unique role of disgust in the etiology of BII fears may partially explain why certain individuals may be less responsive to exposure-based treatment, while others may be prone to relapse (e.g., Woody & Teachman, 2000).

Disgust is a universal emotion that was initially conceptualized as a reaction to the oral incorporation and ingestion of contaminants (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Stimuli capable of eliciting a disgust response represent a broad and diverse range, including animals, odors, foods, bodily products, and hygiene, thereby implying that disgust should not be conceptualized as a unitary construct (Olatunji, Williams, Lohr, & Sawchuk, 2005; Olatunji, Williams, Lohr, & Sawchuk, in press; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999). Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000) dichotomize disgust elicitors into two domains: *core disgust* and *animal reminder disgust*. Core disgust is based on a sense of offensiveness and the threat of contamination, consisting of stimuli such as rotting foods, waste/body products, and small animals that are associated with dirt and disease characteristics. Animal reminder disgust reflects the aversion of stimuli that serve as reminders of the animal origins of humans, consisting of inappropriate sexual acts, poor hygiene, death/mortality, and bodily injury.

In examining the relation between BII and spider fears and core and animal reminder disgust domains, de Jong and Merckelbach (1998) provided initial empirical evidence for “domain-specific” relationships, with BII and spider fears more strongly associated with animal reminder and core disgust elicitors, respectively. These findings have been partially replicated elsewhere (e.g., Koch, O’Neil, Sawchuk, & Connolly, 2002). Certain disgust elicitors do not easily fall into mutually exclusive categories, however. For example, blood

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