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Disgust domains in the prediction of contamination fear

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Abstract

Previous research has shown a relationship between the emotion of disgust and the fear of contamination. Heightened sensitivity to disgust and increased concerns over contamination has been observed in various disorders, such as obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) and specific phobias. However, there is a paucity of research identifying the specific domains of disgust that contribute to contamination fear. The present study sought to determine which domains of disgust elicitors reliably predict scores on a measure of OCD contamination obsessions and washing compulsions. We further conducted exploratory analyses that examined differences in disgust sensitivity among individuals classified as high and low in contamination fear. Three hundred and twenty-three undergraduate participants completed two measures of disgust sensitivity (Disgust Scale; Disgust Emotion Scale) and a measure of contamination fear (Padua inventory, contamination obsessions and washing compulsions subscale). Stepwise multiple regression analyses indicated that contamination fear was best predicted by seven different disgust domains, thereby suggesting that contamination fear is accounted for by generalized, rather than domain-specific, disgust elicitors. The categories of disgust that predicted contamination fear appeared to have an underlying commonality of threat of contagion. The relationship between fear of contamination and disgust sensitivity was more pronounced for animal reminder disgust elicitors as opposed to core disgust elicitors. Results also showed that individuals classified as high in contamination fear scored significantly higher than the low contamination fear group on all disgust domains. Clinical and research implications regarding the interrelationships between fear, disgust, and the fear of contamination are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Fear of contamination is among the most common obsessional theme associated with obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), accounting for an estimated 55.0–57.7% of obsessional concerns reported by such patients (Rasmussen & Tsuang, 1986; Summerfeldt, Antony, Downie, Richter, & Swinson, unpublished manuscript). Given the functional relationship that exists between obsessions and compulsions, it is not surprising that recurring, intrusive thoughts of contamination are highly prevalent among compulsive washers and cleaners (Hodgson & Rachman, 1977; Leckman, Boardman, Zhang, & Grice, 1997). The phenomenology of washing and cleaning rituals suggests that such actions serve to protect the individual through sanitizing and disinfecting themselves and their environment. Protective behaviors also appear to be based on an increased perception of vulnerability to contaminating agents, such as dirt, germs, and bacteria (Rachman, 1994). Likewise, Riskind, Abreu, Strauss, and Holt (1997) argue that individuals with OCD experience fears of rapid, spreading infection following contact with objects that are perceived to be contaminated. As a consequence, compulsive washers often avoid situations and stimuli that provoke obsessional thoughts of infection (Rachman & Shafran, 1998).

Intrusive thoughts and avoidance efforts common to OCD are often conceptualized as being functionally related to fear. Recent developments in theory (Woody & Teachman, 2000) and research (Woody & Tolin, 2002) have begun implicating the involvement of disgust as a possible contributor to the onset and maintenance of certain types of obsessional problems. The fear of contamination construct provides a unique avenue by which to examine the intersection between the emotions of fear and disgust and their relationship to OCD contamination-related concerns. As a basic emotion, disgust serves the adaptive value of protecting the organism from contact with and oral incorporation of noxious or contaminated stimuli (Angyal, 1941; Izard, 1977). In accordance with the disease avoidance model (Matchett & Davey, 1991), behavioral avoidance of disgusting material promotes sanitation while preventing direct contact and subsequent infection (Izard, 1993).

Power and Dagleish (1997) proposed that the emotion of disgust likely contributes to the etiology and maintenance of contamination-related obsessions and washing compulsions in OCD. Preliminary support for the disgust–contamination fear relationship in OCD has been generated by Mancini, Gragnani, and D'Olimpio (2001) who found statistically significant, positive correlations between full-scale disgust scores on the disgust scale (DS; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994) and obsessive–compulsive subscales of washing ($r = 0.39$), checking ($r = 0.38$), and rumination ($r = 0.31$) assessed by the Padua inventory (PI; van Oppen, Hoekstra, & Emmelkamp, 1995). Results from a series of hierarchical regression analyses indicated that disgust was not only a significant predictor of the total score on the PI, but that disgust was the single best predictor of the washing subscale over and above other measures of anxiety and depression (Mancini et al., 2001). Similar correlational findings have been reported in other studies examining the association between measures of disgust and OCD-related contamination fear. Muris et al. (2000) reported a correlation of $r = 0.26$ between the disgust sensitivity questionnaire (DSQ; Rozin, Fallon, & Mandell, 1984) and the Maudsley obsessive compulsive inventory (MOCI; Hodgson & Rachman, 1977). Sawchuk, Lohr, Tolin, Lee, and Kleinknecht (2000) found that the disgust emotion scale (DES; Walls & Kleinknecht, 1996) was positively correlated with the washing/contamination subscales on the PI ($r = 0.50$) and the Vancouver obsessional compulsive inventory (VOCI; Thordson,

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