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Disgust has arrived

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Abstract

Disgust has arrived as an emotion attracting intense study by clinical psychologists. The purpose of this essay is to address several themes adumbrated in the articles in this special series. Topics covered include disgust and evolutionary theories of phobia, disgust and cognition, and the relation between disgust and cannibalism, violence, and fine art.

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1. Introduction

Disgust has been the most understudied of all the emotions—until now. Long overshadowed by fear, disgust has arrived as a topic of study in its own right. Experts in pathological anxiety, for example, have been exploring its role in the etiology and maintenance of phobic disorders, especially intense fears of spiders and of seeing blood. The purpose of my commentary is to elaborate on themes adumbrated in the cutting-edge clinical articles included in this special series on disgust.

2. Danger, disease, and spiders

Spiders are feared by many people, but hardly any of them pose a threat to human beings. Only 0.1% of the 35,000 varieties of spider are dangerous to us

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(F. Renner, 1990; cited in [Merckelbach & de Jong, 1997](#)). Indeed, human beings pose a much greater threat to spiders than spiders do to human beings. Many spiders die each year at the hands (or feet) of human beings, but very few people are harmed by spiders. Although spider phobia is classified as a biologically prepared fear, it is very difficult to see why spiders would trigger an evolved predator defense system in human beings (cf. [Öhman, Dimberg, & Öst, 1985](#)). In almost all lethal encounters between a spider and a human being, the spider loses.

Psychologists have proposed two additional evolutionary explanations for widespread fear of spiders. Some theorists invoke the principle of *adaptive conservatism* to explain why so many individuals fear alleged evolutionary threats such as spiders ([Mineka, 1992](#)). This principle embodies the notion that it is better to be safe than sorry. That is, people can make two kinds of mistakes in their encounters with spiders (or other feared creatures). They can fearfully avoid encounters with spiders that are actually harmless, or they can fail to avoid one of the rare spiders whose bite is fatal to human beings. Because the second kind of error (a “miss”) is vastly more serious than the first kind of error (a “false alarm”), it is presumably adaptive for people to be conservative and steer clear of all spiders, just in case.

The problem with this explanation is that it fails to take into account what economists call *opportunity costs*. Choosing to do whatever it takes to avoid a fatal encounter with a spider entails many foregone opportunities for positive experiences. Not only is there a cost associated with mistaking a dangerous spider for a harmless one, there are substantial costs associated with spider avoidance. Indeed, there is more to spider avoidance than merely refusing to permit the creatures to crawl on one’s arm. Spider-fearful people go to great lengths to avoid encountering spiders, such as failing to go outdoors on a summer’s day. Our prehistoric ancestors who avoided going outdoors lest they encounter a spider would certainly have been conservative. But it is unclear how adaptive such a strategy would have been. Fearing to venture into areas likely to contain spiders (e.g., the outdoors) would incur substantial opportunity costs (e.g., failing to obtain food) that would present much greater risks than bumping into an occasional spider.

Other theorists have suggested that phobic avoidance of spiders and other small creatures is motivated by disgust-related dread of disease, not fear of attack (e.g., [Matchett & Davey, 1991](#); [Mulken, de Jong, & Merckelbach, 1996](#)). Several contributors to this special series have confirmed that proneness to experience the emotion of disgust is, indeed, linked to spider avoidance.

But are spiders and other commonly feared creatures carriers of disease? This is certainly true of rats, but is it true of spiders, cockroaches, slugs, and other creatures that incite disgust reactions? Psychologists have confirmed that disgust—at least as much as fear—fosters phobic avoidance of these animals. Yet, it remains unclear whether the disgust reaction evolved because of disease avoidance. Although people may avoid spiders because they are disgusting, the claim that such avoidance arises because of disease avoidance may be nothing more than a *post hoc* rationalization for an otherwise mysterious aversion.

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