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Disgust as a motivator of avoidance of spiders

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Abstract

Individuals with small animal phobias show elevated general disgust sensitivity, and spider phobics often endorse both fear and disgust in response to a spider. Some researchers have argued that the link between disgust and fear of small animals is spurious. On the other hand, disgust may play a functional role, as might any negative emotion that is strongly stimulus-bound, in which escape or avoidance is negatively reinforced. It is therefore important to clarify whether disgust has a functional or epiphenomenal role in avoidance of feared stimuli. The present study examined the degree to which disgust motivates avoidance of spider-related stimuli using a series of behavioral avoidance tests comparing a harmless tarantula, a pen that had come in contact with the spider, and a clean pen. Peak disgust was a stronger predictor than anxiety of avoidance of both the spider and the “contaminated” pen.

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Research on phobias has typically focused on fear, despite the observation that anxiety likely involves an aggregate of several emotions with fear being the principal feeling (Bartlett & Izard, 1972; Izard, 1972). Like all subjective events, phobic reactions probably involve several emotions that intersect and blend to form the felt experience and to motivate behavioral intentions. An increasing body of research indicates that disgust may be an important feature of some phobias, particularly those of small animals like snakes and spiders. This study

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was designed to use behavioral assessment to better understand the nature of the role of disgust in avoidance of spiders.

Disgust in the context of anxiety disorders has received increased research attention in the past few years. General disgust sensitivity is moderately predictive of general fearfulness (Davey, Forster, & Mayhew, 1993) and more strongly correlated with fear of repulsive animals (Tucker & Bond, 1997). Snake-fearful participants show more disgust sensitivity than do low fear respondents (Klieger & Siejak, 1997), and girls and women with spider phobias show the same pattern (de Jong, Andrea, & Muris, 1997; Merckelbach, de Jong, Arntz, & Schouten, 1993). Disgust sensitivity is also higher among individuals with blood injury phobia (Sawchuk, Lohr, Westendorf, Meunier, & Tolin, 2002). Thorpe and Salkovskis (1998), in contrast, found no differences in disgust sensitivity between groups of participants with spider phobia, other phobias, and no clinical disorders.

Most studies have shown that individuals with some specific phobias or strong fears endorse higher levels of disgust sensitivity, defined as a propensity to feel disgusted in response to a wide range of stimuli. An important question is whether (state) disgust features as a specific part of the phobic emotional experience. When disgust is provided as a potential response, spider phobics often endorse fear and disgust in equal measure (Sawchuk et al., 2002; Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998; Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1997). Tolin et al. (1997) reported that spider phobics rated photographs of spiders as both fearful and disgusting. Participants were just as likely to endorse fear statements such as, “This picture makes me feel like I am in danger” as they were to endorse disgust statements such as, “This picture makes me feel like I might be contaminated or infected.” Ratings of fear and disgust are strongly correlated in most studies of small animal fears (Sawchuk et al., 2002; Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998; Woody & Tolin, 2002).

Although disgust seems to be related to various self-report measures of fear, Thorpe and Salkovskis (1998) argue that the relationship may be correlational, rather than functional. Thorpe and Salkovskis (1998) argue that content overlap may be responsible for the observed correlation in questionnaire studies. Disgust sensitivity questionnaires often include items about other leggy creatures to which spider phobics may be sensitized. However, respondents with specific phobias report elevated disgust responding to a wide range of stimuli across domains including spoiled food, bodily products, and offensive odors (de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998). A more compelling argument offered by Thorpe and Salkovskis (1998) is that phobic fear simply amplifies disgust toward objects that most people already find to be disgusting.

On the other hand, fear and disgust both motivate behavioral withdrawal, so a functional role for disgust in animal phobias is plausible. Fear motivates a desire to seek safety through escape or avoidance, which in turn reduces fear, thus reinforcing avoidance (Mowrer, 1960). Avoidance is central to the impairment associated with most anxiety disorders, and Mowrer’s two-factor theory, although perhaps no longer accepted in its entirety, remains integral to the theoretical basis of behavioral interventions. Disgust may function similarly to fear, as might any

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