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Attention bias for disgust

Michael Charash, Dean McKay*

*Department of Psychology, Fordham University, 441 East Fordham Road,
Bronx, NY 10458-5198, USA*

Abstract

Disgust was originally theorized as a defense against the oral incorporation of offensive objects. Recent research suggests disgust serves as a defense against a wider range of objects and situations in the environment, and may contribute to phobic avoidance. As such, disgust sensitivity was explored for attention and memory biases. Using a sample of 60 undergraduates, an attention bias towards disgust words on a Stroop Color-naming Task was found across all subjects following an emotional priming task. When participants were primed with disgust stories, disgust sensitivity was positively related to latencies on disgust words on a Stroop Color-naming Task, while unrelated in the other groups (fear or neutral primed). Similarly, those same participants demonstrated a positive correlation between their disgust sensitivity and the number of disgust words recalled following the Stroop Task. This, along with the findings of relationships between disgust sensitivity and contamination fears related to obsessive–compulsiveness and eating related symptomatology call for further empirical investigation into the role that disgust plays in psychopathology.

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1. Attention bias for disgust

Darwin (1872/1965) described disgust as something offensive to the taste, and that its expression consists of movements in order to expel food from the mouth. The notion of oral incorporation stems from the recognition that the universal

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-718-817-4498.

E-mail address: mckay@fordham.edu (D. McKay).

facial expression of disgust centers around the mouth, with the opening of the mouth and closing of the nares. This facial expression serves to prevent odor input and to reject food that is already in the mouth (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). While disgust has been widely recognized since Darwin's time as a universal human emotion, it is only recently that disgust has been studied empirically.

Rozin and Fallon (1987), in their definition of disgust, followed Darwin's conceptualization by indicating that disgust involved the "prospect of oral incorporation of an offensive object" (p. 23). They added the principle of contamination as being a necessary condition of disgust. This means that if an acceptable food comes in contact with a disgust object, that acceptable food becomes unacceptable (also referred to as sympathetic magic). Therefore, rejection based on disgust is not primarily based on taste, but involves knowledge of the nature of a substance. Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff (1986) colorfully illustrated this principle, when they found that when a disliked vegetable is dipped into a bowl of soup, that soup would not be rendered inedible. However, dipping a sterilized cockroach in a bowl of soup would likely cause its rejection.

In order to assess an individual's sensitivity to disgust, Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994) developed a scale referred to as the Disgust Sensitivity Scale (DSS). This scale assesses seven disgust elicitors (food, animals, body products, sex, body envelope violations, death, and hygiene) as well as the contamination of those elicitors. In the validation of the DSS, it was found that disgust sensitivity positively correlated with the fear of death (measured by the Fear of Death Scale; Boyar, 1964) and with neuroticism (measured by the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, EPQ; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975). Conversely, disgust sensitivity was negatively correlated with sensation seeking (measured by the Sensation Seeking Scale; Zuckerman, 1979) and with psychoticism (measured by the EPQ). This supported their conceptualization of disgust as a defensive emotion. In addition, gender was found to be a consequential variable in disgust sensitivity, with females exhibiting greater disgust sensitivity than males.

1.1. The role of disgust in phobias

Because disgust had been conceptualized as a defensive emotion, investigators have examined the role disgust plays in fear, and in particular, animal phobias. Matchett and Davey (1991) proposed a model where certain animals are feared because of their association with the spread of disease and contamination, and not because of fear of attack (so called fear-relevant, but harmless animals). This disease-avoidance model would therefore predict that the fear of spiders is primarily an indication of disgust sensitivity. Merckelbach, de Jong, Arntz, and Schouten (1993) demonstrated that women with spider phobia displayed a stronger disgust and contamination sensitivity than their nonphobic counterparts when exposed to unrelated disgust relevant stimuli (being offered a drink from a dirty cup). Interestingly, the two groups did not differ in their perceived dirtiness

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