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The structure of disgust: domain specificity in relation to contamination ideation and excessive washing

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Abstract

The primary goal of the present study was to employ confirmatory factor analysis to compare two theoretical models regarding the factor structure of disgust ($N = 307$). The two-factor model of Animal Reminder and Core disgust proposed by Rozin et al. (2000) demonstrated superior model fit over a one-factor model that has been implicated in prior research. However, contrary to theoretical predictions, categorizing Hygiene disgust as Core disgust rather than Animal Reminder disgust provided an overall better fit for the two-factor model. The second aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between the empirically derived two-factor model and contamination ideation and excessive washing using structural equation modeling. Findings indicated that the Contamination Ideation and Excessive Washing latent factor was specifically related to Core disgust (domain specific) and negatively related to Animal Reminder disgust. The relevance of these findings in the context of future research investigating the role of disgust in specific anxiety disorders is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Disgust is a basic emotion that serves the adaptive function of protecting the organism from contact with and oral incorporation of noxious or contaminated stimuli (Izard, 1977). According to the disease-avoidance model, disgust serves the adaptive function of promoting sanitation while preventing direct contact and subsequent infection (Matchett & Davey, 1991; Ware, Jain, Burgess, & Davey, 1994). Recent developments in theory (e.g., Page, 1994; Power & Dalglish, 1997; Woody & Teachman, 2000) and research (e.g., Page, 2003) implicate the involvement of disgust in the onset and maintenance of specific fears and phobias (Davey, 1994; Merckelbach, de Jong, Arntz, & Schouten, 1993; de Jong, Peters, & Vanderhallen, 2002; Sawchuk, Lohr, Westendorf, Meunier, & Tolin, 2002; Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1997) independent of anxiety symptoms (e.g., Mulkens, de Jong, & Merckelbach, 1996).

Theoretical extensions have proposed that disgust may also contribute to the etiology and maintenance of OCD-related contamination obsessions and washing compulsions (e.g., Phillips, Senior, Fahy, & David, 1998). Preliminary support for the relationship between disgust and contamination obsessions and washing compulsions has been reported by Mancini, Gragnani, and D'Olimpio (2001) who found statistically significant, positive correlations between self-report measures of disgust and obsessive-compulsive washing, checking and rumination. Results from a series of hierarchical regression analyses also indicated that disgust was the single best predictor of obsessive-compulsive washing over and above anxiety and depression (Mancini et al., 2001). Other studies have also reported significant positive correlations between measures of disgust sensitivity and OCD-related contamination concerns (Olatunji, Sawchuk, Lohr, & de Jong, 2004; Sawchuk, Lohr, Tolin, Lee, & Kleinknecht, 2000; Schienle, Start, Walter, & Vaitl, 2003; Thorpe, Patel, & Simonds, 2003). Clinical studies have also shown that compulsive washers report significantly higher disgust sensitivity than non-anxious controls (e.g., Woody & Tolin, 2002).

Examining the role of disgust in various disorders of anxiety offers new theoretical and empirical directions beyond the traditional emphasis on the emotion of fear (Rachman, 1990; Tolin, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1999). Authors have recently suggested that disgust may uniquely contribute to the etiology of specific anxiety disorders (Woody & Teachman, 2000), and that different anxiety disorders may be related to different domains of disgust (Olatunji et al., 2004). Although a number of studies have examined the structure of fear in specific anxiety disorders (e.g., Arrindell, Pickersgill, Merckelbach, Ardon, & Cornet, 1991; Taylor, 1998b), a similar analysis of the structure of disgust has yet to be conducted.

Initial theoretical views of disgust were one-dimensional, limited to the domain of food rejection and aversion (e.g., Darwin, 1872/1965; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). The emphasis on the relationship between disgust and food rejection served as the impetus for the development of the first self-report measure of disgust, the *Disgust Questionnaire (DQ)* (Rozin, Fallon, & Mandell, 1984). The *DQ* has been widely used to assess “disgust sensitivity”. However the scale’s emphasis on a single domain has limited its utility for further examining the relationship between disgust and anxiety disorders (Arrindell, Mulkens, Kok, & Vollenbroek, 1999). A broadening of the conceptual boundaries of disgust revealed that stimuli capable of eliciting disgust represent a diverse range (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993), including animals, odors, bodily products, blood, and hygiene (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999). More recently developed self-report

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