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Disgust sensitivity and emotion regulation potentiate the effect of disgust propensity on spider fear, blood-injection-injury fear, and contamination fear

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ABSTRACT

Research consistently reveals a relation between disgust and specific anxiety concerns, but research has only begun to investigate possible mechanisms by which this relation occurs. The current study tested whether disgust sensitivity (DS; a specific difficulty regulating disgust) and general emotion dysregulation (GED; non-emotion-specific regulation difficulties) moderated the relation between disgust propensity (DP) and spider fear, blood-injection-injury (BII) fear, and contamination fear. A total of 594 undergraduate students completed verbal-report measures of DP, DS, GED, negative affectivity, and spider, BII, and contamination fears. Results suggest that GED potentiates the ability of DP to predict spider and contamination fears, but not BII fears. DS potentiates the ability of DP to predict BII fears, but not spider or contamination fears. These data suggest that GED and DS are possible mechanisms that strengthen the influence of DP on spider, BII, and contamination fears. The present study demonstrates the utility of incorporating emotion regulation into the theory of disgust in certain anxiety disorders.

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1. Introduction

Disgust is defined as a revulsion response towards potential sources of contagion (Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Research consistently demonstrates a relation between the

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emotion of disgust and specific anxiety disorders (Olatunji & Sawchuk, 2005; Woody & Teachman, 2000). Verbal-report measures of disgust (e.g., the Disgust Scale; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994) have been found to positively correlate with verbal-report measures of spider fear (de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998; Mulkens, de Jong, & Merckelbach, 1996), blood-injection-injury fear (BII; de Jong & Merckelbach, 1998; Olatunji, Williams, Sawchuk, & Lohr, 2006), and contamination fear (Olatunji, Cisler, Deacon, Connolly, & Lohr, 2007; Olatunji, Sawchuk, Lohr, & de Jong, 2004; Cisler, Olatunji, Sawchuk, & Lohr, 2008). Participants with high spider, blood-injection-injury, or contamination fears label disorder-relevant stimuli as disgusting (Olatunji, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Tolin, 2007; Sawchuk, Lohr, Westendorf, Meunier, & Tolin, 2002). Additionally, elevated disgust is positively related to behavioral avoidance of disorder-relevant stimuli among individuals with spider (Olatunji & Deacon, 2008; Woody, McLean, & Klassen, 2005), BII (Koch, O'Neill, Sawchuk, & Connolly, 2002), or contamination fears (Olatunji, Lohr et al., 2007).

Despite the consistent association between heightened disgust and heightened anxiety, research has only just begun to elucidate possible mechanisms by which disgust influences anxiety (e.g., Davey, Bickerstaffe, & MacDonald, 2006). Elucidating the routes by which disgust influences anxiety can add considerable explanatory power to the growing theory of disgust in anxiety (Olatunji & McKay, 2008). Elucidating these routes could also aid in developing theories of the etiology and maintenance of particular anxious concerns (e.g., spider fear). Finally, research along these lines could also counter previous assertions that disgust is epiphenomenal to fear in disgust-related anxiety disorders (Edwards & Salkovskis, 2006; Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998). Salkovskis and colleagues (Edwards & Salkovskis, 2006; Thorpe & Salkovskis, 1998) have argued that fear potentiates the experience of disgust; thus, the heightened levels of disgust in these populations are epiphenomenal and non-causal. Identification of routes by which disgust influences anxiety would suggest that the relation between disgust and anxiety is not epiphenomenal; rather, disgust may be a vulnerability factor that confers risk for these anxiety disorders via the identified mechanisms.

Recent research suggests that emotion regulation may be one possible mechanism that strengthens the influence of disgust on anxiety. Emotion regulation can be defined as “the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Researchers have suggested that difficulties in emotion regulation contribute to the development and maintenance of disordered anxiety (Amstadter, 2008; Forsyth, Eifert, & Barrios, 2006; Moses & Barlow, 2006; Olatunji, Forsyth, & Feldner, 2007). Moreover, Barlow’s unified treatment for emotional disorders is based largely on teaching adaptive emotion regulation skills (Barlow, Allen, & Choate, 2004; Moses & Barlow, 2006). Two lines of evidence suggest that this general theory of emotion regulation and anxiety can be extended to explain how disgust influences anxiety.

First, recent theoretical (Olatunji & Cisler, 2008) and empirical (Olatunji, Cisler, Deacon, Connolly, & Lohr, 2007; van Overveld, de Jong, Peters, Cavanagh, & Davey, 2006) advances have begun to differentiate ‘disgust sensitivity (DS)’ from ‘disgust propensity (DP).’ DS refers to negative reactions towards the experience of disgust (e.g., Item 16 on the Disgust Sensitivity and Propensity Scale-revised [DPPS-R], van Overveld et al., 2006; ‘I think feeling disgust is bad for me’). DP, however, refers to the frequency or ease with which individuals respond with disgust (e.g., Item 10 on the DPSS-R; ‘I experience disgust’). The refined DS construct is consistent with emotion dysregulation theories of anxiety (e.g., Moses & Barlow, 2006) because it refers to distress resulting from the experience of the emotion itself. DS may also be related to Gratz and Roemer’s (2004) conceptualization of emotion dysregulation, which posits several sub-domains of emotion dysregulation, such as emotion non-acceptance and lack of strategies to regulate emotions.

Second, recent research demonstrates that anxiety sensitivity moderates the relation between disgust propensity and contamination fears, such that heightened anxiety sensitivity potentiates the degree to which disgust predicts contamination fears (Cisler, Reardon, Williams, & Lohr, 2007; Cisler et al., 2008). This suggests that a fear of responding with disgust may serve as an emotional maintenance process for contamination fears. This interpretation is consistent with emotion regulation theories of anxiety (e.g., Barlow et al., 2004; Moses & Barlow, 2006) that posit emotional avoidance as a central process underlying anxiety. Thus, these data suggest that difficulties in emotion regulation may be a possible mechanism that strengthens the influence of disgust on anxiety.

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