**The Experience of Fear in Specific Phobia**

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**Potential Target Journals:**

Biological Psychiatry

Psychological Science

Clinical Psychological Science (Impact: 8.60)

Journal of Anxiety Disorders (Impact: 5.26)

Behavior Research & Therapy (Impact: 4.134)

Biological Psychology (Impact: 2.6)

Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry (Impact 2.184)

1. **Introduction**
   1. Specific phobia is a syndrome characterized principally by the persistent tendency to respond fearfully to a specific stimulus (e.g., a spider) with intensity that is disproportionate to the threat that stimulus presents.
   2. Much of the research on specific phobia has focused on how this tendency develops.
   3. However, we have comparatively little insight into the specific psychological processes that unfold after an individual is confronted with a specific stimulus that lead those with specific phobia to subjectively experience greater fear.
      1. It is not sufficient to say that those with specific phobia have greater fear responding because they have specific phobia. This is tautological: specific phobia denotes their tendency to respond fearfully. The key question here is: what are the psychological processes that unfold in response to a feared stimulus that distinguish those with specific phobia from those without?
      2. One possibility is…
      3. Another possibility is …
   4. The aim of this study is to evaluate whether individual differences in autonomic arousal or subjective arousal and valence in response to feared stimuli can account for the relationship between specific phobia and the subjective experience of fear.

**II. Method**

**III. Results**

1. Cross-sectional analyses

**Table 1.** Cross-sectional Pearson Correlation Coefficients Among Specific Phobia and Response Indices

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Phobia** | **Skin Conductance Response** | **Heart Period** | **Arousal** | **Valence** |
| **Heights** | | | | | |
| Skin Conductance | 0.04 |  |  |  |  |
| Heart Period | -0.16 | -0.08 |  |  |  |
| Arousal | 0.01 | 0.19 | 0.12 |  |  |
| Valence | -0.46 | -0.01 | 0.10 | 0.11 |  |
| Fear | 0.51 | -0.02 | -0.13 | 0.24 | -0.63 |
| **Social** | | | | | |
| Skin Conductance | -0.06 |  |  |  |  |
| Heart Period | -0.08 | -0.17 |  |  |  |
| Arousal | 0.08 | -0.02 | 0.07 |  |  |
| Valence | -0.39 | 0.16 | 0.02 | -0.03 |  |
| Fear | 0.49 | -0.02 | -0.05 | 0.38 | -0.37 |
| **Spider** | | | | | |
| Skin Conductance | 0.26 |  |  |  |  |
| Heart Period | -0.16 | -0.24 |  |  |  |
| Arousal | 0.27 | 0.26 | -0.06 |  |  |
| Valence | -0.36 | -0.25 | 0.16 | -0.24 |  |
| Fear | 0.57 | 0.28 | -0.19 | 0.53 | -0.66 |

**Table 2. Multilevel Model Predicting Fear**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Heights** | **Social** | **Spiders** |
| Phobia | **3.35\*\*\*** | **3.92\*\*\*** | **5.07\*\*\*** |
| **Within-Person** |  |  |  |
| SCR | **3.41\*\*\*** | -0.89 | -1.46 |
| HP | 0.76 | -1.35 | 0.50 |
| Arousal | **2.32\*** | 1.21 | **5.28\*\*\*** |
| Valence | **-6.64\*\*\*** | **-3.08\*\*\*** | **-7.64\*\*\*** |
| **Between-Person** |  |  |  |
| SCR | -0.53 | 0.06 | 0.06 |
| HP | -1.57 | **-1.97\*** | -1.63 |
| Arousal | **4.36\*\*\*** | **4.22\*\*\*** | **5.93\*\*\*** |
| Valence | **-7.72\*\*\*** | **-2.41\*** | **-6.80\*\*\*** |
| **Interaction** |  |  |  |
| SCR\*Phobia | -1.08 | 0.74 | 1.90 |
| HP\*Phobia | 0.19 | 1.32 | -0.33 |
| Arousal\*Phobia | 0.76 | 1.67 | 1.93 |
| Valence\*Phobia | -0.43 | -1.52 | -0.20 |

Consistent with a predictive processing framework in which phobia is more about the concept than about active processing of internal or external sensations.

**IV. Discussion**

1. Core findings
   1. Subjective arousal and valence were significant predictors of fear response, both between-person and within-person
   2. These findings were consistent across heights phobia, spider phobia, and social phobia
   3. When subjective arousal and valence were included in the model, objective indices of arousal were not significant predictors
   4. Specific phobia did not moderate the relationship between any variables as predictors of fear
   5. Specific phobia remained a significant predictor after accounting for the effects of objective indices of arousal, subjective arousal, and subjective valence.
2. Discussion of Arousal/Valence findings
3. Persistence of Specific Phobia findings
   1. If not for elevated physiological reactivity and subjectively experienced arousal and fear, what accounts for the relationship between specific phobia and fear?
      1. One possibility: expectation. Those with specific phobia expect and, consequently, experience, fear in response to these stimuli.
4. Limitations
   1. Not causal. Cross-sectional.
   2. Self-report severity of specific phobia rather than diagnosis
   3. Common-method variance may account for at least some of the relationship between subjective arousal, valence, and fear
5. Conclusion