Reversing Mental Contamination: The Role of Appraisals
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Abstract

Previous research in the area of contamination fears has successfully evoked feelings of mental contamination (MC; i.e., internal, psychological feelings of dirtiness, urges to wash and actual washing behavior; Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman, 2005; Elliott & Radomsky, 2009). The aim of this study was to examine if these feelings could be reversed with verbal feedback (i.e., a cognitive intervention). Female undergraduates (n = 96) listened to an audio recording and imagined receiving a non-consensual kiss from a man whose character was described as immoral.

• Indices of MC were assessed before providing feedback regarding the man’s actual character as being the opposite of how he behaved (Reversal condition; n = 32), as being the same as how he behaved (Neutral condition; n = 33), or no feedback at all and were asked to complete simple math problems (Neutral condition; n = 31).

• Indices of MC were then reassessed by a second MCR.

• Participants then engaged in a behavioral task in which a break was provided and washing behavior and the reason for doing so were assessed.

Method Cont’d.

Procedure:

• Female participants were asked to complete the VOCI-CTN, VOCI-MC, BDI-II, ASI, and DS questionnaires.

• Next, they listened to an audio recording and imagined that they were receiving a forced, non-consensual kiss from a man whose character was described as immoral.

• Indices of MC were assessed following the imagined event by the MCR.

• Participants were then provided with feedback regarding the man’s actual character as being the opposite of how he behaved (Reversal condition; n = 32), as being the same as how he behaved (Neutral condition; n = 33), or no feedback at all and were asked to complete simple math problems (Neutral condition; n = 31).

• Indices of MC were then reassessed by a second MCR.

• Participants then engaged in a behavioral task in which a break was provided and washing behavior and the reason for doing so were assessed.

Method

Participants:

• 96 female undergraduate students (mean age = 22.79, SD = 5.65; range = 18 to 52-years) completed this study.

Measures:

• Vancouver Obsessional Compulsive Inventory (contact) Contamination subscale (VOCI-CTN, Thordarson et al., 2004).

• Vancouver Obsessional Compulsive Inventory - Mental Contamination Scale (VOCI-MC, Rachman, 2005).

• Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996).

• Anxiety Sensitivity Index (ASI; Reiss, S., et al., 1986).

• Disgust Scale (DS; Hadt, McCauley & Rozin, 1994).

• Mental Contamination Report (MCR; Elliott & Radomsky, 2009).

Results Cont’d.

• Participants in the Neutral condition reported significantly lower VOCI-MC scores (F(2, 93) = 2.72; p = .07) than those in the Reversal condition (p = .02), and thus, VOCI-MC scores were included as a covariant for subsequent analyses.

• Results indicated an overall multivariate effect for change scores between pre-feedback and post-feedback feelings of dirtiness and urges to wash (p = .008, respectively, see Table 1 and Figure 1).

• In terms of appraisal variables, there was a main effect for decrease in appraisals of personal responsibility for the event occurrence (F(3, 92) = 4.17; p = .008, such that participants in the Consistent condition reported a greater decrease in responsibility scores than those in the Reversal and Neutral conditions (p < .008 and .004, respectively, see Table 2 and Figure 2).

• In the Reversal condition, a decrease in feelings of dirtiness was significantly correlated with a decrease in appraisals of immorality of the man’s character (r = .36, p = .047) after controlling for VOCI-MC scores, and there was trend for urges to wash (r = .33, p = .071). In the Consistent condition, a decrease in urges to wash was significantly correlated with a decrease in appraisals of responsibility (r = .38; p = .034) after controlling for VOCI-MC scores.

• There were significantly more participants in the Consistent condition who engaged in washing behaviors in direct response to the imagined event (χ² (2) = 6.39; p = .04). Further, there were significantly more participants in the Reversal condition who engaged in washing behaviors but did not know why they did so.

Discussion

• Feelings of MC were reduced when participants were provided with information disconfirming beliefs regarding the man’s character.

• However, consistent information also led to a decrease in MC, but it was no more than receiving no information, and no less than receiving inconsistent information.

• Interestingly, consistent information led to a significant decrease in appraisals of personal responsibility that was not evident with the other types of feedback.

• Participants in the Neutral condition experienced the least amount of decrease in MC symptoms; yet, they also engaged in significantly fewer washing behaviors. One explanation may be that providing a reminder of the man and/or act (e.g., verbal feedback) led participants to wash.

• Future studies should further examine if perpetrator or negative event reminders may lead to washing, and results should be replicated with a clinical sample to assess the feasibility of these variables as the focus of treatment.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of change in dirtiness and urges to wash scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre Dirtiness</th>
<th>Post Dirtiness</th>
<th>Δ Dirtiness</th>
<th>Pre Urges to Wash</th>
<th>Post Urges to Wash</th>
<th>Δ Urges to Wash</th>
<th>Δ Urges to Wash</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reversal</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>26.58</td>
<td>-10.17</td>
<td>21.10</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>11.88</td>
<td>2.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>27.94</td>
<td>-8.81</td>
<td>21.44</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>36.30</td>
<td>33.91</td>
<td>-2.39</td>
<td>21.44</td>
<td>9.22</td>
<td>12.22</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of change in appraisals scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Pre Responsibility</th>
<th>Post Responsibility</th>
<th>Δ Responsibility</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>0.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
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<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
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Table 3. Frequencies of participants who washed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Direct Response</th>
<th>Don’t Know Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reversal</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>7</td>
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</table>

References


This study was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.