Mental Contamination: Teasing Apart Imagined Physical Dirt and Immorality

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Abstract

There are two types of contamination fear: Fear of mental contamination (MC) and of contact contamination (Rachman, 2006). Previous research involving MC has faced limitations in that more than one variable was manipulated simultaneously. The purpose of this study was to tease apart the (im) morality of the act from the physicality of the situation to examine how these variables contribute to the experience of MC. Female undergraduates (n = 140) were asked to listen to and imagine experiencing one of four scenarios depicting a consensual or non-consensual kiss, from a physically clean or physically dirty man. Results indicated main effects of desirability and of physically on feelings of dirtiness, urges to wash, and negative emotions. An imagined non-consensual act paired with physical dirt evoked the greatest feelings of MC. In addition, the non-consensual act led to more washing behaviour than the consensual act. Results are discussed in terms of cognitive-behavioural conceptualizations of and treatments for contamination fears.

Introduction

• Mental contamination (MC) is characterized by a feeling of dirtiness, the source of which is difficult to locate. It may also involve urges to wash and negative emotions that are internally- (e.g., INE; feelings of being ashamed, guilty, humiliated, cheap, afraid, sad, and sleazy) or externally- (e.g., ENE; feelings of being angry, anxious, distressed and disgusted by the man’s behaviour and appearance) focused.

• A distinguishing factor between MC and contact contamination is that MC can be evoked with thoughts, images, words (see Fairbrother & Rachman, 2004) and imagined events (see Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman, 2005) and it is difficult to ‘wash it off’ (Rachman, 2006).

• Research in this area faced limitations in that more than one variable has been manipulated simultaneously. For instance, an immoral act (e.g., a non-consensual kiss) has been paired with a physically dirty situation (e.g., a man described as dirty; Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman, 2005; Herba & Rachman, 2007).

• The purpose of the current study was to tease apart the (im) morality of an act from the physicality of a situation to determine the extent to which these factors contribute to the experience of MC.

Method

Participants:

The sample consisted of n = 140 female undergraduate students (average age = 22.70, SD = 5.29, range = 18 to 55 years) who completed the study individually in the laboratory.

To assess whether participants would respond to the manipulation, sexual orientation was measured using a Kinsey-type likert scale (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). One participant in each of the two consensual conditions indicated being exclusively homosexual; however, they were not statistical outliers on any variable of interest and thus were considered generally appropriate for the study.

Measures:

• Questionnaires included the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II); Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Beck & Steer, 1990), and Vancouver Obsessional Compulsive Inventory contamination subscale (VOCI-CTN; Thordarson et al., 2004).

• Ratings of dirtiness (on a 100 point scale), urges to wash, and negative emotions (INE; feelings of being angry, anxious, distressed and disgusted by the man’s behaviour and appearance) focused. Results indicated main effects of desirability and of physically on feelings of dirtiness, urges to wash, and negative emotions. An imagined non-consensual act paired with physical dirt evoked the greatest feelings of MC. In addition, the non-consensual act led to more washing behaviour than the consensual act. Results are discussed in terms of cognitive-behavioural conceptualizations of and treatments for contamination fears.

Method Cont’d.

• To examine the extent to which mental contamination had been evoked in the participants, as well as to obtain ratings of the physicality of the man after imagining the kiss, the Mental Contamination Report (MCR; Elliott & Radomsky, 2009) was administered.

Procedure:

• Participants first completed the BDII-II, BAI, and VOCl-CTN questionnaires.

• Next, they were asked to imagine experiencing one of four scenarios via audio recording depicting the following: Sharing a consensual kiss with a man described as either clean (CPC) or physically dirty (CPD), or receiving a non-consensual kiss from a man described as clean (NCPC) or dirty (NCPD).

• Finally, after the imagined kiss, participants completed the MCR.

Results

• Participants in all conditions differed significantly on post-kiss perceptions of physical dirtiness of the man F (3, 137) = 103.00, p < .001, partial η2 = .70 from each other (all p’s < .01) such that those in the NCPC condition reported the greatest dirtiness, followed by those in the CPD, NCPC and CPC conditions, respectively (see Figure 1).

• Ease to imagine the scenario ratings were entered as a covariate for group differences F (3,134) = 5.20; p < .01 such that those in the NCPC condition reported that it was easier to imagine the scenario than those in the other three conditions (p’s < .047); and there was a tendency for those in the CPD condition to report it was more difficult than those in the CPC and NCPC conditions (p’s = .06 & .09).

• Results indicated a main effect of desirability of the kiss F (1, 132) = 7.87, p < .001, partial η2 = .06, and a main effect of physicality of the man F (1, 132) = 77.84, p < .001, partial η2 = .37, and an interaction between the two F (1, 132) = 7.87, p < .01, partial η2 = .06; after controlling for the covariate such that those in the NCPC condition reported the greatest feelings of MC and those in the CPC reported the least (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations of MC indices).

• Participants in the NCPC condition reported the greatest feelings of dirtiness (p’s < .001), those in the CPC condition the least (p’s < .001), and no significant difference between those in the NCPC and CPD conditions (p = .27; see Figure 2).

• Participants in the NCPC condition reported the greatest urges to wash (p’s < .075), those in the CPC condition the least (p’s < .001), and no significant difference between those in the NCPC and CPD conditions (p = .18).

• Participants in the NCPC condition had a tendency to report significantly greater INE than participants in the CPD (p = .08) condition but did not significantly differ from those in the NCPC condition (p = .28); participants in the NCPC and CPD conditions did not significantly differ (p = .44); and those in the CPC condition reported significantly lower INE than participants in the other three conditions (all p’s < .001).

• Participants in all four conditions differed significantly from each other on INE in descending order from greatest to least: NCPC, CPC, CPD to CPC (all p’s < .001).

• Finally, participants in the NC (n = 6) conditions engaged in washing behaviour more frequently than those in the C (n = 0) conditions X2 (1, 138) = 6.09, p < .014.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of MC indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CPC</th>
<th>CPD</th>
<th>NCPC</th>
<th>NCPC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dirtiness</td>
<td>4.27 (.92)</td>
<td>48.37 (34.39)</td>
<td>44.06 (26.13)</td>
<td>76.57 (17.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urges to Wash</td>
<td>1.76 (.85)</td>
<td>42.31 (34.78)</td>
<td>35.25 (28.30)</td>
<td>58.25 (27.55)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INE</td>
<td>6.26 (12.44)</td>
<td>30.21 (24.94)</td>
<td>34.43 (24.18)</td>
<td>40.30 (21.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENE</td>
<td>5.33 (9.86)</td>
<td>33.60 (23.03)</td>
<td>53.41 (20.99)</td>
<td>72.44 (20.77)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

• Results indicated an imagined negative event involving a physically dirty stimulus can evoke MC, as can a negative event involving a physically clean stimulus or a neutral event involving a physically dirty stimulus but to a lesser degree.

• Limitations of this study include relying on participants’ ability to imagine an event in the laboratory and the use of a narrow sample of female undergraduate students which may limit generalizability.

• Clinical implications of these results involve enhancing assessment and treatment of contamination fear. In particular, a better understanding of the conditions involved in MC would allow us to identify MC in the first place by assessing for negative experiences (e.g., assault, betrayal) and symptoms, and develop more targeted treatment strategies (e.g., refined behavioural experiments).

• Research implications of these results involve the use of paradigms which involve vignettes and audio and video clips which may be evoking MC rather than the construct of interest.

• Future research involving MC should examine other negative events, including those which do not involve imagined physical contact.

References


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