Explanations of fear-related disorders

Lesson 3.4.2 | Clinical psychology

Core ideas

Classical conditioning can explain how a neutral object or situation becomes associated with fear after a frightening or unpleasant experience.

The required biological account is genetic vulnerability. Öst (1992), an illustrative blood/injection-phobia study, supplies evidence about family patterns and physiological/behavioural features; family resemblance alone cannot separate inherited and learned influences.

Classical conditioning pairs a formerly neutral stimulus with an aversive experience. Watson and Rayner's (1920) Little Albert illustrates learned fear and stimulus generalisation, while raising major consent, distress and sample-size concerns.

The required psychodynamic account uses unconscious conflict and displacement. Freud's Little Hans case (1909) interprets a boy's horse phobia through family conflict; evaluate reliance on interpretation and reports mediated through the father.

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Key terms

Classical conditioning: Learning by association between two stimuli.

Operant conditioning: Learning through consequences such as relief or reward.

Avoidance: Staying away from a feared object or situation.

Negative reinforcement: A behaviour becoming more likely because it removes an unpleasant feeling.

Displacement: Redirecting an emotion from its original focus to another object or situation in a psychodynamic account.

Further detail and evidence

Genetic vulnerability: family patterns in blood/injection phobia, illustrated by Öst (1992), are consistent with inherited susceptibility. Families also share models and experiences; a family history does not separate these influences automatically.

Classical conditioning: a neutral rat was paired with a loud aversive sound in Watson and Rayner's Little Albert case. The rat could then elicit fear; fear also generalised to related furry stimuli. Label the unconditioned stimulus/response and conditioned stimulus/response, rather than calling any avoidance classical conditioning.

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Continued

Psychodynamic account: Freud interpreted Little Hans's horse fear as displacement of unconscious conflict involving his parents. The horse became a safer symbolic target than the feared family conflict. This is an interpretation of a case, rather than an experimentally demonstrated causal sequence.

Applying the ideas

A painful injection could act as an aversive event and the sight of a syringe become a learned fear cue. Continued avoidance may additionally be negatively reinforced by relief. That maintenance mechanism complements the original classical-conditioning account but should not be confused with the pairing itself.

Evaluation and connections

Little Albert offers observation of fear learning but has one infant, limited controls and serious distress/consent concerns. Hans provides detailed meaning but relies on indirect reports and difficult-to-falsify interpretation. Genetic accounts generalise risk but may be reductionist. Compare which evidence could distinguish competing explanations.