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Is outgroup fear contagious? Vicariously acquired fears to outgroup faces resist extinction, but the effect is mitigated by other-oriented empathy

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Abstract

Learned fears of stimuli from phylogenetically fear-relevant categories (such as snakes and spiders) tend to be significantly more resistant to extinction than those from fear-irrelevant categories (such as birds and butterflies.) Olsson et al. (2005) demonstrated that representations of outgroup members, as defined by race, can act as fear-relevant stimuli in a classical conditioning paradigm. It is not as clear, however, whether (and how) persistent fear of outgroup members can be acquired vicariously. We investigate whether observers of interactions with negative outcomes associated with representations of outgroup members develop extinction-resistant fears. Our results indicate that outgroup members can act as fear-relevant stimuli in an observational scenario. The effect is not sensitive to self-relevance manipulations; importantly, however, other-oriented empathy may reduce the tendency toward forming extinction-resistant conditioned responses to outgroup members. Implications of these preliminary results, including limitations and suggestions for future research, are discussed.

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