Effects of Distress on Eating: The Importance of Ego-Involvement

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Schotte (1992) argued that ego threat is not a necessary precondition for the disinhibition of eating in dieters. This article agrees that there are indeed other triggers for disinhibition, as has long been widely acknowledged, but also argues that when distress does act as a trigger for disinhibition, it does so by threatening the dieter's self-image.

In a recent article (Heatherton, Herman, & Polivy, 1991), we proposed and demonstrated that physical fear differs from more general dysphoria or distress in its effects on eating. Schotte (1992), however, argued that we have exaggerated the role of ego-involvement in distress-induced eating by insisting that ego-involvement is a precondition for such overeating. Schotte also argued that we have overlooked the role of factors other than distress as triggers of disinhibited eating. We welcome the opportunity to clarify our position on these issues.

Our published (Heatherton et al., 1991) and unpublished (Herman, Polivy, & Heatherton, 1991) articles have suggested that distress disinhibits eating in dieters by inducing an "escape from self." This idea, taken from Baumeister (1989, 1990) and Heatherton and Baumeister (1991), hinges on the proposition that threats to their self-image motivate people to escape from self-awareness, which is especially aversive when they encounter negative information about the self. To escape from this state, dieters (or binge eaters) tend to avoid broadly meaningful thought and instead narrow their attention to the immediate stimulus situation. This cognitive shift redirects attention away from unpleasant thoughts about the self and toward food cues in the environment; it also has the effect of disengaging restraints and inhibitions that are normally supported by meaningful thought (see also Baumeister, 1991). The result, for the dieter, is disinhibited eating.

Not all types of distress threaten the self-image. Physical threats have little implication for one's self-worth; accordingly, we do not expect that they will lead to escape attempts and consequent disinhibition of eating. We are in agreement with Schotte (1992) and with the experimental literature: Physical threats do not disinhibit dieters' eating.

Schotte (1992) took issue with our contention that ego-involvement or a threat to one's self-image is a necessary component of those instances of distress that do promote disinhibition. He cited a number of studies involving subjects who were exposed to horror films or to false feedback regarding their arousal state. These studies clearly obtained disinhibited eating in dieters. Schotte maintained that they involve distress but do not involve ego threats. In the case of horror films, it is not entirely clear that they involve distress, and in the case of false autonomic feedback, it is fairly clear that they do involve a self-image threat.

Horror Films

After early childhood, relatively few individuals who watch horror movies feel that their physical self is being threatened. Horror movies depend on one's capacity to empathize with on-screen characters and to personalize the threat made by the various monsters, villains, and demons (Grixti, 1989; Tudor, 1989); these reactions, however, should not be confused with the actual experience of physical fear. The most important point to remember is that people seek out and enjoy horror films (King, 1981), whereas they by no means seek out or enjoy equivalent experiences (encounters with powerful, malicious creatures) in real life. Indeed, one of the principal motives for watching horror films is escape. People experience a wide range of emotions (positive and negative) when watching horror movies, but as long as the movie is compelling, what they experience most of all is an escape from self-awareness; they "lose themselves" in the movie. Their attention is focused on the "horrible" events in the film, away from the self, and incidentally away from whatever restraints might normally prevent them from consuming the food (notably popcorn) provided for them. Disinhibition of eating is especially likely when palatable food is available in the absence of normal dietary precautions.

Schotte (1992) argued that horror films affect eating because of their distressing effects rather than because of the attentional processes that we have just described. To the extent that they do involve distress, it seems likely that this distress is in fact ego-involving, as is evidenced by Schotte's own data (Schotte, Cools, & McNally, 1990) in which horror films led to increases not only in anxiety but also in depression, which we ordinarily

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1 Schotte (1992) stated that our review failed to cite several studies. Of the five studies that he mentioned, we did cite two of them; the third was only tangentially related, the fourth appeared after our article was in press, and the fifth has only recently been accepted for publication! Thus, the charge that we willfully failed to cite several studies seems to us unfounded.

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take to be an index of ego threat. Regardless of the nature of distress, we believe that horror films operate through a mechanism of reduced self-awareness. Whether through distraction or through escape from self-image, the importance is the escape from negative self-awareness.

False Autonomic Feedback

Schotte (1992) cited the studies by Slochower (1976; Slochower & Kaplan, 1980) in which false feedback indicating that the subject is experiencing uncontrollable arousal leads to disinhibited eating by obese (and presumably dieting) individuals. Schotte argued that such experiences do not involve an ego threat, but we believe that they do. First, such false feedback will trigger the same search for an explanation of one’s agitation that occurs when the individual actually experiences arousal (Valins, 1966; see review by Parkinson, 1985); indeed, such false feedback may actually produce the very arousal that is falsely being conveyed to the subject (Goldstein, Fink, & Mettee, 1972). And such arousal, especially in the absence of a satisfying and benign explanation, may itself be distressing (“What is wrong with me?”; Maslach, 1979). In short, false autonomic feedback is likely to lead to self-scrutiny. Fenigstein and Carver (1978) clearly demonstrated that false autonomic feedback leads to increased levels of self-awareness; moreover, this self-awareness was of a general sort (“hearing one’s heartbeat, for example, would lead to an overall awareness of oneself, rather than simply an awareness of one’s heartbeat” [p. 1242]). In the case of dieters—who are generally more depressed and anxious than nondieters (e.g., Rosen, Tacy, & Howell, 1990) and who display lower self-esteem (Polivy, Heatherton, & Herman, 1988)—such augmented self-awareness might be expected to be particularly aversive and likely to trigger attempts to escape from the self.

We maintain that when distressed dieters overeat, the dieter is engaging in an escape from aversive self-awareness. This would appear to be the case for Slochower’s (1976; Slochower & Kaplan, 1980) false feedback studies. We hasten to add, however, that dieters do not overeat only when they are distressed. As Schotte (1992) noted, an amusing film may trigger overeating in dieters. In our view, this overeating is more clearly attributable to the fact that the movie is distracting (“escapist”) than to the fact that it produces positive emotions. In either case, however, it has never been our position that distress is the sole source of disinhibition. The majority of our own research (see Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991, or Herman & Polivy, 1988, for reviews) has examined disinhibited eating in dieters in situations that are not explicitly distressing. The many studies on preload-induced disinhibition in our laboratory and elsewhere, for instance, have never referred to the preload as a distressing experience; the preload has usually been seen as a diet-breaker, which undermines restraint by destroying dietary calculations. It is conceivable, of course, that having one’s diet broken is a distracting emotional experience; if so, we submit that this distress surely involves an aversive self-focus. In principle, though, there may be many roads to disinhibition that involve no distress whatsoever. Our own studies on the disinhibiting effects of alcohol on dieters’ eating (Polivy & Herman, 1976a, 1976b) would appear to be the case for Slochower’s (1976; Slochower & Kaplan, 1980) false feedback studies. We hasten to add, however, that they do. First, such false feedback will trigger the same search for an explanation of one’s agitation that occurs when the individual actually experiences arousal (Valins, 1966; see review by Parkinson, 1985); indeed, such false feedback may actually produce the very arousal that is falsely being conveyed to the subject (Goldstein, Fink, & Mettee, 1972). And such arousal, especially in the absence of a satisfying and benign explanation, may itself be distressing (“What is wrong with me?”; Maslach, 1979). In short, false autonomic feedback is likely to lead to self-scrutiny. Fenigstein and Carver (1978) clearly demonstrated that false autonomic feedback leads to increased levels of self-awareness; moreover, this self-awareness was of a general sort (“hearing one’s heartbeat, for example, would lead to an overall awareness of oneself, rather than simply an awareness of one’s heartbeat” [p. 1242]). In the case of dieters—who are generally more depressed and anxious than nondieters (e.g., Rosen, Tacy, & Howell, 1990) and who display lower self-esteem (Polivy, Heatherton, & Herman, 1988)—such augmented self-awareness might be expected to be particularly aversive and likely to trigger attempts to escape from the self.

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