

Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation  
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THE AVOIDANCE RESPONSE TO PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION  
OF THREATENING SITUATIONS

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The problem of this investigation was to explain a paradoxical finding in studies of perceptual and imaginative behavior. Some persons give perceptual or imaginative responses related to a potentially threatening event when the stimulus conditions for eliciting these responses are weak, but avoid giving such responses when the stimulus conditions are strong (i.e., more suggestive of the threatening event).

In the present research, subjects were asked to tell imaginative stories about series of ambiguous pictures under the different conditions. The first condition (neutral), provided no intentional suggestion as to what the content of the stories should be. The second condition (aroused), for the same subjects, focused their attention on a particular event, which might be threatening to some of them. The hypothesis-information theory of cognition implies that all subjects should tell more stories dealing with the critical event under aroused than under neutral conditions. However, some of them behaved in the opposite fashion: the tendency to tell stories about the critical event decreased in the aroused condition. These subjects are called avoiders.

The proposed theoretical formulation posits a conflict between two opposing tendencies in a subject who is afraid of the event. The approach tendency suggested by the hypothesis-information theory is counteracted by an avoidance tendency; and the stronger the stimulus conditions become, the more likely the subject is to avoid imaginative references to the threatening event. Since avoidance results from fear, it is hypothesized that symptoms of fear will appear in those stories which avoiders do tell about the critical event. According to current

psychological theory and clinical testing practice, fear may be manifested within an imaginative story by: (1) blocking of imaginative processes, (2) failure to describe adaptive behavior of the characters, and (3) failure to arrive at a successful outcome.

Stories from three studies involving 139, 35, and 62 subjects were analyzed according to the proposed theoretical formulation. The threatening events represented were war catastrophe and competitive achievement situations. Behavioral criteria of avoidance and of fear expressed in stories were designated for each study. Twenty-three empirical hypotheses concerning differences between avoiders' and non-avoiders' stories about the critical event were tested. In eleven instances, stories told by avoiders contained significantly more symptoms of fear than the stories of non-avoiders. Eleven of the remaining (non-significant) differences occurred in the predicted direction. There was one significant reversal. The symptoms of fear which characterized the stories of avoiders most reliably were: (1) lack of successful outcome, (2) absence of problem-oriented activity, (3) failure of the subject to evidence a realistic acceptance of the situation, and (4) relatively short length.

Although the stories which avoiders and non-avoiders told about the critical events differed in the characteristics mentioned, their stories about non-threatening events did not. Consequently, it cannot be maintained that the designated symptoms of fear within the stories represent a fearful subject's mode of reacting to all kinds of problem situations. Rather they appear to represent a mode of reacting to those situations of which he is afraid.

The results of this research have relevance for current theories of perception and cognition. Hypothesis-information theory purports to explain all cognitive responses in terms of the relative strengths of various approach tendencies. It would appear necessary to modify the theory by positing a fear-produced avoidance tendency as one of the determinants of cognitive responses when the event is potentially threatening.