

Exploring the Victorian fear of cats

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The EU-funded DISEASES project has been exploring how the Victorians diagnosed, understood and dealt with many of the phenomena related to stress and overload that characterise today's modern globalised society. One intriguing discovery has been on the Victorian emphasis on phobias, particularly ailurophobia – the fear of cats.

Phobias are a normal part of every day and most people will admit to

having at least one (for your writer, enclosed spaces and clowns). However, it was really only in the late nineteenth century that medicine turned its attention to forms of irrational fears, as the DISEASES project has been finding out.

Its research highlights how it was a German physician, Carl Westphal, who made the initial diagnosis of agoraphobia ([fear](#) of open spaces) in 1871 after studying three otherwise sane and rational professional men who were terrified when having to cross an open city space. Following this diagnosis, the notion that such individuals could be overtaken by various forms of inexplicable fear was quickly taken up by both medical practitioners and the era's popular culture.

Indeed, American psychologist G Stanley Hall identified 136 different forms of pathological fear, all possessing their own Greek or Latinate names. These included more commonly recognised phobias such as agoraphobia and claustrophobia but also some very Victorian-esque fears, including amakophobia (fear of carriages), pteronophobia (fear of feathers) and hypochondria (fear of responsibility).

However, one phobia that attracted a particularly high amount of attention from Victorian contemporaries was ailurophobia – the fear of cats. Hall, along with his colleague Silas Weir Mitchell, sent out forms and questionnaires to try and understand the various forms and potential causes of this feline fear. Mitchell went further, trying to ascertain whether the claims of some sufferers that they could always detect if a cat was in a room (even if they couldn't see or smell it) were in fact true.

He conducted experiments, such as placing sufferers into a room with a hidden cat, to see if they picked up the animal's presence. Initially sceptical, he eventually became more convinced that many of his patients could always sense them. When trying to account for the phobia, he ruled out asthma and evolutionary inherited fears (for example,

people who are scared of cats are perfectly fine to look at lions, tigers etc.).

Eventually he suggested that emanations from the cat 'may affect the nervous system through the nasal membrane, although recognised as odours.' He also remained baffled over why cats seemed to have an urge to get as close as possible to individuals who were scared of them – 'even strange cats seem to have an unusual desire to be near them [ailurophobia sufferers], to jump on their laps or to follow them.'

According to the DISEASES project team, the Victorian urge to classify a vivid cultural and psychological map of fears and anxieties was the result of a rapidly changing, industrialising society, where new scientific theories were starting to challenge long-held religious explanations and dogma.

Consequently, in an age reminiscent of our Victorian forbearers, where societies are again struggling to adapt to rapid technological, social and economic changes, DISEASES aims to engage the Victorian experience to better understand and contextualise our own twenty-first century response to modernity's continued challenges. The project, coordinated from Oxford University, will run until January 2019 and has received just over EUR 3.5 million in EU funding.

More information: Project page:
cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/110493_en.html

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