



# On the nature of creepiness

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## ABSTRACT

Surprisingly, until now there has never been an empirical study of “creepiness.” An international sample of 1341 individuals responded to an online survey. Males were perceived as being more likely to be creepy than females, and females were more likely to associate sexual threat with creepiness. Unusual nonverbal behavior and characteristics associated with unpredictability were also predictors of creepiness, as were some occupations and hobbies. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that being “creeped out” is an evolved adaptive emotional response to ambiguity about the presence of threat that enables us to maintain vigilance during times of uncertainty.

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## 1. Introduction

It is the goal of this paper to introduce a theoretical perspective on the common psychological experience of feeling “*creeped out*,” and to uncover the cues that we use to label other people as creepy. In other words, we are attempting to identify the building blocks of this thing we call “creepiness.” Most people have probably used the concept of “creepiness” to describe their reactions to individuals whom they have encountered, and an initial perception of an individual as “creepy” undoubtedly creates an impediment to comfortable future social interactions with that person. The “creepy” psychological reaction is both unpleasant and confusing, and it may be accompanied by physical symptoms such as feeling cold or chilly (Leander, Chartrand, & Bargh, 2012). Given its pervasiveness in everyday human social life, it is very surprising that no one has studied it in a scientific way. The only research that is even close is the aforementioned study by Leander and colleagues who discovered that interacting with individuals displaying inappropriate levels of nonverbal mimicry during social interaction produces an actual physical sensation of feeling cold. Their explanation for the phenomenon is that such non-normative nonverbal behavior signals a social mismatch and put us on our

guard against a cold and potentially untrustworthy interaction partner. The fact that social exclusion and other types of social threat produce similar feelings of “getting the chills” is consistent with the idea that our “creepiness detector” is in fact a defense against some sort of threat (Knight & Borden, 1979; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008).

But what exactly is it that our creepiness detector is warning us about? It cannot just be a clear warning of physical or social harm. A mugger who points a gun in your face and demands money is certainly threatening and terrifying. Yet, most people would probably not use the word “creepy” to describe this situation. It is our belief that creepiness is anxiety aroused by the *ambiguity* of whether there is something to fear or not and/or by the ambiguity of the precise nature of the threat (e.g., sexual, physical violence, contamination, etc) that might be present. Such uncertainty results in a paralysis as to how one should respond. In the mugging situation, there is no ambiguity about the presence or nature of threat. It may be that it is only when we are confronted with uncertainty about threat that we get “creeped out,” which could be adaptive if it facilitates our ability to maintain vigilance during periods of uncertainty. Thus, it is our contention that “creepy” is a qualitatively different characteristic than related concepts such as “terrifying” or “disgusting” in which the conclusions drawn about the person in question are much more clear-cut.

Creepiness may be related to the “agency-detection” mechanisms proposed by evolutionary psychologists (Atran, 2002; Barrett, 2005). To oversimplify a bit, these mechanisms have

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evolved as adaptations to protect us from harm at the hands of predators and enemies. If you are walking down a dark city street and hear the sound of something moving in the dark alley to your right, you will respond with a heightened level of arousal and sharply focused attention and behave as if there is a willful “agent” present who is about to do you harm. If it turns out that it is just a gust of wind or a stray cat, you have lost little by over-reacting, but if you fail to activate the alarm response when there is in fact a threat present, the cost of your miscalculation may be quite high. Thus, humans have evolved to err on the side of detecting threats in such ambiguous situations. Consequently, people become uneasy in environments that are dark and/or offer a lot of hiding places for potential predators and also lack clear, unobstructed views of the landscape. These environmental qualities have been called “prospect” and “refuge” by the British geographer Jay Appleton (1975, 1984). Fear of crime and a pervasive sense of unease are experienced in environments with less than optimal combinations of prospect and refuge (Fisher & Nasar, 1992). So, it is not the clear presence of danger that makes us feel creepy, but the uncertainty of whether danger is present or not.

Consequently, the feeling of being creeped out is unpleasant. It would be considered rude and embarrassing to run away from an odd person who has done nothing overtly threatening, but, on the other hand, it could be perilous to ignore your intuition and remain in an interaction that is dangerous. This ambivalence leaves you frozen in place, wallowing in unease.

We are essentially starting from scratch when identifying the building blocks of “creepiness.” Szczurek, Monin, & Gross (2012) have found that we wish to keep greater social distance between ourselves and individuals who display inappropriate or non-normative expression of emotion, and Leander et al. (2012) indicated that inappropriate nonverbal behavior may serve as a creepiness cue, but surely there must be other things. Are particular physical characteristics or types of people considered creepy? Do certain occupations or hobbies also cause us to perceive others as creepy? Is creepiness a characteristic of humans alone, or can places, things, and animals be thought of as creepy too? At this time, we simply do not know the answers to these questions.

Since there is no previous body of research and theory to build upon directly, this study is unavoidably exploratory in nature. However, there are a few hypotheses that can be tested.

- 1) If creepiness communicates potential threat, males should be more likely to be perceived as creepy than females, since males are simply more violent and physically threatening to more people (McAndrew, 2009).
- 2) Related to the first prediction, females should be more likely than males to perceive some sort of sexual threat from a creepy person.
- 3) Occupations that signal a fascination with threatening stimuli (e.g., death or “non-normative” sex) may attract individuals that would be comfortable in such a work environment. Hence, some occupations should be perceived as creepier than other occupations.
- 4) Since we hypothesize that creepiness is a function of uncertainty about threat, non-normative nonverbal behavior and actions or characteristics associated with unpredictability will be positively associated with perceptions of creepiness.

## 2. Materials and method

### 2.1. Participants

A snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit

participants. People were recruited through invitations to Facebook events that were created by the researchers, through campus-wide emails distributed to students, faculty, and staff at a liberal arts college in the American Midwest, and through the “Social Psychology Network” website. Volunteers were encouraged to forward the link to the online survey to their friends and acquaintances. Participants were simply told that it was a study on the nature of creepiness. A brief description of the study and a link to the survey were posted on the invitation page. This resulted in a final sample of 1341 individuals (1029 females, 312 males) ranging in age from 18 to 77 with a mean age of 28.97 ( $SD = 11.34$ ). We did not ask participants to report their country of origin, but in an unrelated study using an identical recruitment strategy, respondents from 54 different nations were acquired. Thus, although our sample was primarily American, we are confident that there was significant international representation. Participants had to check a box confirming that they were at least 18 years of age before they could access the survey.

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

An online survey was created using Google Documents. Participants began the survey by reporting their sex and age and by responding to a forced choice question that asked them to choose whether they thought that a creepy person was more likely to be a male or a female. They then proceeded to a survey divided into four sections.

In the first section of the survey, participants considered the following scenario:

Imagine a close friend of yours whose judgment you trust. Now imagine that this friend tells you that she or he just met someone for the first time and tells you that the person was “creepy.”

After reading this scenario, the participants rated the likelihood that the creepy person exhibited 44 different patterns of behavior (e.g., the person never looked your friend in the eye) or physical characteristics (e.g., this person had visible tattoos) on a “1” (very unlikely) to “5” (very likely) scale.

In the second section of the survey, participants rated the creepiness of 21 different occupations on a “1” (not at all creepy) to “5” (very creepy) scale.

In the third section of the survey, participants simply listed two hobbies (via free response) that they thought were creepy.

In the fourth and final section of the survey, participants expressed their degree of agreement with 15 statements about the nature of creepy people on a “1” (strongly disagree) to “5” (strongly agree) scale. Examples of these statements include the following:

“I am uncomfortable because I cannot predict how he or she will behave.”

“I think that the person has a sexual interest in me.”

“People are creepier online than when I meet them face-to-face.”

There was one final question on the survey. Participants chose a response of “yes,” “no,” or “unsure” to the question “Do most creepy people know that they are creepy?”

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