



Sound morality: Irritating and icky noises amplify judgments in divergent moral domains



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ABSTRACT

Theoretical models and correlational research suggest that anger and disgust play different roles in moral judgment. Anger is theorized to underlie reactions to crimes against persons, such as battery and unfairness, and disgust is theorized to underlie reactions to crimes against nature, such as sexual transgressions and cannibalism. To date, however, it has not been shown that induction of these two emotions has divergent effects. In this experiment we show divergent effects of anger and disgust. We use sounds to elicit anger and disgust, and participants are then asked to consider moral vignettes. As compared to disgust and control condition, anger increases severity of judgments about crimes against persons, and disgust increases severity of judgments about crimes against nature, but not conversely.

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1. Introduction

In recent months, President Obama came under public scrutiny when his political opponent, Mitt Romney, criticized him for having eaten dog meat as a child when he lived in Indonesia. In a quick counter attack, Obama was eager to point out that Romney put his dog in a crate fastened to the roof of his car while embarking on a 12-h drive from Massachusetts to Canada. Many Americans expressed moral outrage at both Obama and Romney. But the nature of the condemnation may have been different. Eating dogs and harming dogs may elicit two very different emotions: anger and disgust. Referring to the Obama incident, one political columnist said, “The thought of eating man’s best friend is, of course, repulsive to us” (Parker, 2012). Romney’s behavior, in contrast, seemed more outrageous than repulsive. This contrast is the focus of the present research.

Using novel methodology, we used irritating and icky sounds to induce anger and disgust, and we sought to investigate whether these emotions play different roles in moral judgment.

Philosophers have long argued that emotions underlie moral judgment (Hume, 1739/1978), and this has been confirmed by psychological research (for reviews, see Haidt, 2001; Prinz, 2007). One of the most important suggestions in this psychological work is that different emotions underlie different kinds of moral judgments. Of particular interest is a distinction between violations of autonomy, which are associated with anger, and violations of purity, which are associated with disgust (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Examples of autonomy violations include physical assault, theft, unfair distribution, cruelty, and trespassing of rights. Here, some person or sentient being is harmed. Examples of purity violations include bestiality, incest, and cannibalism. Here, there can be cases in which no one is harmed; for example, if someone eats a dog that has died of natural causes, it might still strike some people as morally wrong because, in cultures where dogs are not consumed, eating them seems unnatural. We will refer to these as crimes against nature to

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emphasize the fact that there may be an inchoate impression that such crimes deviate from the natural order (Prinz, 2007).

To date, no one has shown that experimental induction of anger and disgust selectively impact these two moral domains. Using irritating noise to induce anger and the sound of man vomiting to induce disgust, we show that these two emotions can make moral judgments more severe and their impact depends on the moral domain in question.

Previous work has used correlation methods to suggest that disgust and anger play different roles in morality. For example, Horberg, Oveis, Keltner and Cohen (2009) found that people report feeling grossed out or angry depending on the moral violation in question. They also found that self-reported anger predicted harsher moral judgments of justice but not purity violations, and self-reported feelings of disgust predicted harsher moral judgments of purity but not justice violations. Related to this, Russell and Giner-Sorolla (2011) manipulated harm, intent, and taboo status with various moral vignettes and found that self-reported anger responded independently of disgust to harm, and self-reported disgust responded independently to body violations. They also found that manipulating harmfulness and taboo status increased self-reported anger and disgust respectively.

Several studies have shown that disgust induction (elicited through hypnosis, smell, film clips, recall, and taste) can make moral judgments more severe in general (Eskine, Kacirik, & Prinz, 2011; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). However, these studies compare disgust to neutral or sadness conditions. We are unaware of any emotion induction experiments that directly manipulate disgust and compare it to anger, establishing a selective impact on the moral domains in question. Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, and Cohen (2009) found that induced disgust, and not sadness, influenced judgments on crimes against nature, but they did not induce anger in that study. Indeed, we are not aware of any studies that directly explore the impact of experimentally induced anger on wrongness judgments.

Though direct comparisons between anger and disgust have not been reported in induction studies, one might still wonder why past inductions of disgust have not selectively impacted crimes against nature. Wheatley and Haidt (2005), Schnall et al. (2008), and Eskine et al. (2011) all found that disgust can impact autonomy and purity violations equally. We speculate that the failure to find differential effects had two sources. First, the induction methods may not have been successful in excluding anger. Schnall et al. induced disgust using a dirty desk and a film clip showing a filthy bathroom; participants may have been irritated to see environments that had not been adequately maintained. Schnall et al. also used autobiographical recall, but people may recall disgusting events that also induce anger, such as encounters with poor sanitation. Eskine et al. used a bitter beverage to induce disgust, but anger was not measured in that study; bitter tastes may make people feel bitter about the world, which can be understood as a kind of anger.

Second, some of the vignettes used in these studies may not have adequately differentiated the two domains. For example, Haidt and Wheatley used vignettes that draw attention to negative character traits, not just negative actions: a corrupt politician, a shoplifter, and an ambulance chaser. In general, people may tend to infer bad character traits when they read about bad actions (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011). People with bad character traits are sometimes described as being moral monsters or suffering from moral deformities. Such language suggests that bad character is conceptualized as belonging to the purity domain: it is construed as unnatural. Thus, people who regularly commit harmful acts (autonomy violations) can be regarded as disgusting (a purity violation); for example, Rozin and Nemeroff (1990) found that people are disgusted at the thought of wearing Hitler's sweater. To avoid this confound, we crafted vignettes that did not invite imputation of negative character.

The primary goals of this investigation are threefold. First we sought to show that induced anger is capable of making wrongness judgments more severe. Second, we wanted to directly establish that induction of anger and disgust selectively impact divergent moral domains. In particular, we predicted that induced anger would increase wrongness judgments for vignettes describing autonomy violation but not purity violations, and conversely for induced disgust. Third, we wanted to show that such effects on the severity of moral judgments could be induced by sounds. We used irritating noise to elicit anger, and icky sounds to induce disgust. If sounds can influence morality, there is a risk that moral judgments may be unduly severe in noisy environments.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 166 CUNY undergraduate students (118 female, 46 male, two did not report gender) who were recruited from psychology classes or from the psychology department subject pool.

2.2. Materials

We induced anger with "noise music," a genre that uses electric and acoustic instruments to create harsh, jarring, and dissonant sounds. The track we used was the title song from *Inner Mind Mystique*, composed by Yamazaki "Maso" Takushi (Takushi, 1996). Disgust was induced with the sound of an emetic event (a person vomiting).

2.3. Procedure

Each participant was tested individually and was randomly assigned to one of three sound conditions (harsh noise, vomit sound, or control) and one of the two vignette types (autonomy or purity violations). In the two sound conditions, participants were told that the study was about the interference of sounds on the ability to process infor-

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