



Reports

Embodied metaphors and emotions in the moralization of restrained eating practices

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Restrained eating is moralized among women and embodied in a sense of cleanliness.
- ▶ Overeating increased women's desire for physical cleanliness.
- ▶ Moral emotions fully mediated the effect of overeating on desire for cleanliness.

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ABSTRACT

Moralization is the process whereby preferences are converted to values. Two studies used an embodied metaphor approach, in which moral metaphors are grounded in one's sense of physical cleanliness, to investigate whether restrained eating practices are moralized among women. Specifically, we predicted that the restraint of food by women is embodied in their feelings of physical cleanliness. Study 1 found that failures of restrained eating (i.e., overeating) increased accessibility of physical cleanliness-related words for women, but not men. Study 2 found that increased negative moral emotions fully mediated the effect of overeating on a desire for physical cleanliness. Overall, the studies argue for the importance of morality in restrained eating and in the central role of emotions in the embodiment of cognitive metaphors.

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Introduction

"As society at large slipped off the constraints of traditional religious morality, the old moral code—diminished in scope, more constricted than ever, but functionally unchanged—tightened on women's bodies." — Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*

Moralization "converts preferences into values" (Rozin, 1999, p. 67), imbuing behaviors with certain psychological properties and, according to recent work on embodied metaphors, a feeling of physical cleanliness. In particular, behaviors such as eating practices have been moralized across many historical contexts: for instance, vegetarianism has been moralized among practicing Hindus as part of Ahimsa for centuries while more recently the production and consumption of locally grown and sustainable foods are increasingly viewed through a moral lens in the United States. Another eating practice that has risen sharply during the latter half of the 20th century and increasingly across the world (see Nasser, Katzman, & Gordon, 2001) is the strict monitoring and restriction of food intake among women. And although at first glance restrained eating practices seem to be motivated by adherence to "conventional" cultural

standards of beauty and thinness, we believe that it has also taken on moral psychological properties.

Moralization and metaphors

Bodily concepts such as physical balance, force, and cleanliness are extended by metaphor to understand and give meaning to more abstract concepts of time, power, and morality, respectively (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, Johnson (1987) gives the example of "the force of an argument." Here, the concept of force is used metaphorically, but Johnson keenly notes that a metaphorical force is actually understood and given meaning by us through our understanding of physical force placed on our bodies. Similarly, Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) showed that our understanding of morality is grounded in our sense of physical cleanliness. In their studies, the authors found that cleaning hands bolstered one's moral self-image and that a threat to one's morality increased the desire to physically clean oneself. Specifically, participants recalling an unethical deed showed increased mental accessibility of cleansing-related words and increased desirability of cleansing-related products such as antiseptic wipes. The authors conclude that moral failures render participants with a desire to literally "wash away their sins."

Moralization of a particular behavior affixes relevant successes and failures of that behavior to our feelings of physical cleanliness.

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If failure to abide by certain eating practices induces a desire for physical cleanliness, there is good reason to believe that these practices are moralized.

Restrained eating among women

Restrained eating, the strict regulation of type and amount of food intake (Herman & Polivy, 1980), has become increasingly prevalent among women. Examples of restrained eating include chronic or continuous dieting and, to a much more pathological extent, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Much of the research on this type of eating practice has focused on the influence of cultural standards on women's food intake (e.g., Striegel-Moore, Silberstein, & Rodin, 1986) showing, for instance, that media messages towards women largely emphasize weight consciousness, strict regulation of food intake and idealized standards of female thinness and emaciation (e.g., Greenberg & Worrell, 2005; Quart, 2003; Smith, 2004). These cultural standards promote disordered eating (Striegel-Moore et al., 1986), greater efforts in dieting and restricting food intake (Herman & Polivy, 1975, 1980), body dissatisfaction (Davison & McCabe, 2005; Greenwood & Pietromonaco, 2003), and self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Huon & Brown, 1984) among women.

Wolf (1991), in her analysis of these cultural standards, showed that the messages promoting restrained eating “reverberate with reference to religious ideas of temptation and sin” (p. 88). For example, sweets and desserts are often referred to as “sinful,” “indulgences,” and “temptations.” One can “cheat” on a diet detox regimens claim to cleanse the body of food toxins – part of what Wolf called the “Cycle of Purification.” If, according to an embodied perspective, metaphors are not solely cognitive abstractions but are grounded in our bodily experiences, equating certain types of eating with “sin” may serve more than rhetorical purposes. These messages may highlight the moralization of restrained eating whereby failures of restrained eating are perceived by women as moral failures, thereby embodied in their feelings of physical cleanliness.

Moral metaphors and emotions: A potential mechanism?

Subjective feelings are central to any embodied cognition account. For instance, recounting an unethical deed induces feelings of physical uncleanliness (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). These feelings of physical uncleanliness likely entail painful recognitions of moral failure, as manifested by negative moral emotions, which may then drive the desire for subsequent physical cleanliness. Emotions have long been acknowledged as motivators of our desires and actions, especially those concerning morality (Hume, 1777/1960). Although past literature on embodied cognition has yet to identify the mechanisms regulating the desire for physical cleanliness, we suspect emotional responses to threats to our morality play a central role.

In fact, the presence of moral emotions has been found among those high in restrained eating practices. Overeating has been found to induce shame, guilt, anger, and disgust towards oneself (e.g., Costanzo, Reichmann, Friedman, & Musante, 2001) and disordered eating is linked with these particular emotions (e.g., Fox & Froom, 2009; Sanftner, Barlow, Marschall, & Tangney, 1995; Troop, Treasure, & Serpell, 2002; von Ranson, Stevenson, Cannon, & Shah, 2009; Waller et al., 2003). Moreover, the literature on emotional eating also indicates the importance of emotions in the precursors and consequences of overeating. We would thus expect that failures of restrained eating practices for women would incur negative moral emotional responses, underpinning an embodied desire for cleanliness.

Present studies

The following studies used an embodied metaphor account to investigate the moralization of restrained eating practices. We expected

failures of restrained eating, such as overeating, to induce a desire for physical cleanliness for women in particular. We also investigated the role of emotions in the embodiment of cognitive metaphors and expected that negative moral emotions felt after overeating drive the subsequent desire for physical cleanliness.

Study 1

Study 1 tested whether restrained eating practices are moralized and thus grounded in experiences of physical cleanliness. We expected overeating to incur a desire to physically cleanse and thereby make cleansing-related constructs accessible. Given past research showing women as primary targets of cultural messages regarding restrained eating, we expected this effect to occur for women but not for men.

Method

Participants. A total of 100 participants from the University of St. Andrews took part in the study, 50 of whom identified themselves as women and 50 as men. There were 56 who identified themselves as White, 25 South Asian, 8 East Asian, 8 as “Other.”

Materials

Overeating recall task. Participants were randomly assigned to either an overeating recall task condition or a no-task control condition. The overeating recall task activated thoughts of one's failure to restrict eating by asking participants to recount a time when they ate too much. Specifically, participants were asked to think back to a time when they ate too much and describe that experience in writing with as much detail as possible.

Word completion task. Three word fragments developed by Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) were used to measure mental accessibility of cleansing-related words. The word fragments could be completed with either a cleansing-related or non-cleansing-related word. Here, SH - - ER could be completed either by “shower” or “shiver”; W - - H by either “wash” or “wish”; S - - P by either “soap” or “stop.” They were interspersed with two neutral filler word fragments that could not be completed with a cleansing-related word (H - - SE; e.g., “house”; M - - L”; e.g., “mail”). The Word Completion Task was given immediately after the Overeating Recall Task. Participants were then given a brief demographics questionnaire, fully debriefed, and thanked for their participation.

Results and discussion

The number of cleansing-related words generated was found to be non-normally distributed, with a skewness of .84 (SE = .25) ($W = .80$, $p < .001$). One approach to analyzing nonnormal data is the bootstrap method because it is free from assumptions of normality (e.g., Byrne, 2009). A multiple regression in which condition (overeating = 1, control = 0), gender (women = 1, men = 0), and the condition by gender interaction as predictor variables of number of cleansing-related words was conducted (see Fig. 1). Although no main effects of condition ($B = .02$, $SE = .21$, $p = .92$; 95% CI: $-.391/.410$) or gender ($B = .24$, $SE = .21$, $p = .25$; 95% CI: $-.643/.154$) were found, a significant interaction between condition and gender emerged ($B = .73$, $SE = .30$, $p = .02$; 95% CI: $.312/1.301$). Follow-up simple effect tests found that women in the overeating condition (Mdn = 2) generated more cleansing-related words compared to men in the overeating condition (Mdn = 1), $U = 187$, $Z = -1.96$, $p = .05$. Women in the overeating condition generated more cleansing-related words than women in the control condition (Mdn = 1), $U = 175$, $Z = -3.19$, $p = .001$. Finally, no differences in number of cleansing-related words were found between women (Mdn = 1) and men (Mdn = 0) in the control conditions, $U = 261$, $Z = -1.13$, $p = .26$.

Overall, Study 1 found that women who recalled a time they “ate too much” displayed a heightened accessibility of cleansing-related words.

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