



Report

The arousal model of moral condemnation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Three experiments examine the affective determinants of moral condemnation.
- A variety of arousing affective states increase moral condemnations.
- A simple manipulation of arousal also increases moral condemnations.

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ABSTRACT

Previous research regarding the affective correlates of moral judgment has emphasized that this relation is rooted in the natural properties of discrete emotions, suggesting that specific emotions (e.g., disgust) increase moral condemnations for specific categories of moral violation (e.g. purity violations). In three experiments, we find that arousal increases the severity of moral condemnations, while emotion specificity effects remain absent. Results are compatible with constructivist approaches to emotion and the feelings as information account of social judgment.

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Introduction

According to the Feelings as Information Model (Schwarz & Clore, 1996), incidental feeling states serve as informational cues that influence social judgment. The present paper examines the effect of incidental feelings on condemnatory judgments regarding a moral violation (e.g., a burglary). This effect emerges even if the source of the feeling is completely irrelevant to the judgment, as a result of misattribution processes (Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz & Clore, 1996). This paper proposes that incidental feelings of arousal increase moral condemnation. This *Arousal Hypothesis* can be distinguished from the *Disgust Specificity* and *Appraisal-Based Specificity* hypothesis.

Emotion-specificity hypotheses

The Social Intuitionist Model (Haidt, 2001) first proposed that intuitive judgments influence moral condemnation. Proponents of this approach subsequently suggested that disgust is especially influential

in determining moral condemnation (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). This is because, in the course of human evolution, morality became uniquely associated with disgust (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999). Presumably, our pre-modern ancestors evolved a physical distaste system that signaled the presence of noxious substances. From this system developed a psychological distaste system that signaled the presence of noxious affronts to our psychological well-being. Thus, the *Disgust Specificity Hypothesis* proposes that moral condemnation is especially strong when individuals experience disgust. Consistent with this hypothesis, incidental disgust increases moral condemnation (Schnall et al., 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). Indeed, social taboos that elicit disgust are judged to be morally wrong even if they produce no harm (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993).

A second emotion-specificity hypothesis suggests that the effect of emotion depends on the nature of the moral violation. Haidt and Graham (2007) identify five categories of moral violation. These involve harm/care, fairness/justice, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Each domain activates distinct needs, emotions, and cognitive associations (Rai & Fiske, 2012; Young & Saxe, 2011). A specific emotion presumably influences moral judgment within a domain that is relevant to the emotion. According to this *Appraisal-Based Specificity Hypothesis*, disgust amplifies condemnations for purity violations (e.g., immoral sexual practices), whereas anger amplifies condemnations for justice violations (see Bright & Goodman-Delahunty, 2006; Horberg, Oveis, & Keltner, 2011).

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Arousal Hypothesis

In contrast to the emotion-specificity hypotheses, the *Arousal Hypothesis* proposes that moral condemnation is magnified by feelings of arousal (activation) associated with a variety of states. In line with excitation transfer (Zillman, 1971) and cognitive labeling theory (Schachter & Singer, 1962), this hypothesis posits that arousal may be misattributed, intensifying the perceived immorality of the target's behavior. Excitation transfer effects emerge in research on emotion (e.g., Erdmann & Janke, 1978; Sinclair, Hoffman, Mark, Martin, & Pickering, 1994), aggression (e.g., Zillman, 1971), dissonance (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Cooper, Fazio, & Rhodewalt, 1978), attraction (e.g., White & Kight, 1984), and clinical disorders (e.g., Storms & Nisbett, 1970).

Misattribution of arousal is most clearly documented in research regarding the misattribution of irrelevant arousal to an emotional source (Reisenzein, 1983). Arousal elicited by a cue can fail to completely dissipate when individuals encounter emotional cues in a subsequent situation. This increases the sum total of arousal experienced in the subsequent situation. The individual attributes this amplified arousal to cues in the subsequent situation, and reactions to these cues are intensified through a process of misattribution (Reisenzein, 1983; Sinclair et al., 1994; Zillman, Johnson, & Day, 1974). Reactions to the subsequent situation are, in part, "constructed" by interpreting the transferred arousal in terms of affective cues contained in the subsequent situation (see Barrett, 2004; Lindquist & Barrett, 2008; Russell, 2003 for a related constructivist model of emotion).

According to the feelings-as-information approach (Schwarz & Clore, 1996), misattribution occurs for many feeling states (e.g., mood, arousal, ease of retrieval). Thus, the Arousal Hypothesis constitutes an instantiation of the feelings-as-information approach. Importantly, misattribution of arousal occurs even when the hedonic valence of the original and second stimulus differ (Bryant & Miron, 2003; Cooper et al., 1978; Meuller & Donnerstein, 1981). Regardless of the valence of the initial stimulus, arousal will be interpreted as "aversion" if the subsequent cue is unappealing (White, Fishbein, & Rutstein, 1981). Both negative (e.g., disgust) and positive arousing states (e.g., positive excitement) should magnify negative ratings of immoral behavior. This distinguishes the Arousal Hypothesis from the mood-congruent judgment hypothesis.

Experiment 1

Research regarding the Disgust Specificity Hypothesis has often compared disgust to a control condition, and has yet to compare disgust to a variety of alternative emotional states. Experiment 1 examined whether the Disgust Specificity Hypothesis is supported when comparing disgust to a variety of emotions. Participants viewed photographs that elicited disgust, fear, sadness (grief), positive excitement, or a neutral emotional state. Then, participants responded to two moral violations. The Disgust Specificity Hypothesis predicts that condemnatory reactions to the moral violations will be greatest in the Disgust condition. Effects of this nature might predominantly emerge for participants high in Private Body Consciousness (PBC). These individuals are acutely aware of their bodily sensations, and may be more likely to rely on emotion when deriving their judgments (Baradell & Klein, 1993; Miller, Murphy, & Buss, 1981; Schnall et al., 2008).¹

¹ Arousal elicited by extreme physical exertion can be too extreme to be plausibly attributed to a less extreme cue in the subsequent situation (e.g., rude remark). Increased awareness of such arousal can remind individuals of the actual source (e.g., riding bicycle) and reduce misattribution (Zillman et al., 1974). In this study, the incidental feeling is more subtle. Under such conditions, awareness of bodily sensations increases the influence of incidental emotion on judgment (Schnall et al., 2008; see also Scheier & Carver, 1977).

Method

280 undergraduate university students were randomly assigned to the disgust, fear, grief, positive excitement, or neutral photo condition. Participants viewed seven photographs from the International Affective Picture System on a computer (Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1995).² Each was presented for thirty seconds, followed by a five second screen indicating "Get ready to view the upcoming photograph." Pilot testing confirmed each emotion photo increased the intensity of the intended emotion, and each neutral photo elicited low levels of emotional intensity (Mikels et al., 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Participants then completed an ostensibly separate experiment in which they read two vignettes. The Burglary Vignette stated "David's house was recently burglarized by his neighbor, Bruce. When David went on vacation, Bruce broke into his house and stole money, jewelry, as well as several large appliances." The Money Laundering Vignette stated "A United States Congressman started a non-profit organization, purportedly to benefit public schools. The congressman then used this organization to launder inappropriate and illegal monetary gifts for the sole benefit of the congressman." After each vignette, participants rated the behavior on an immorality scale ranging from 1 ("not at all morally wrong") to 7 ("extremely morally wrong"), and rated the degree to which the punishment for the violation should be 1 ("lenient") versus 7 ("severe").

Results

Predicting immorality ratings

Immorality ratings for the two scenarios yielded poor reliability ($\alpha = .32$). Thus, the two scenarios were analyzed separately. Private Body Consciousness (PBC) did not moderate the effects of emotion (all p -values > .33), and was excluded in the analyses below.

Although Emotion did not influence ratings of the Money Laundering Scenario ($F < 1$), it influenced ratings of the Burglary Scenario, $F(4, 275) = 3.11, p < .02, d = .59, \eta^2 = .04$.³ Fig. 1 depicts moral condemnations as a function of Emotion for the Burglary Scenario. Condemnation was similar for Disgust ($M = 6.71, SD = .71$), Fear ($M = 6.87, SD = .39$), Grief ($M = 6.70, SD = .61$), and Positive Excitement ($M = 6.68, SD = .55$), but lower in the Neutral condition ($M = 6.45, SD = .85$). Pairwise comparisons between the non-neutral emotion conditions were non-significant (all p -values > .18). However, each emotion yielded more severe condemnations than the neutral condition ($p < .05$ for Disgust, Fear, Grief; $p = .06$ for Excitement). Contrary to the *Disgust Specificity Hypothesis*, condemnations were not most severe in the Disgust condition. Pairwise comparisons were non-significant when comparing Disgust to each non-neutral emotion (all p -values > .20).

All non-neutral emotions, both positive and negative, increased moral condemnation. Thus, it seemed clear that emotion specificity and mood (valence) congruent judgment effects were not at play. In contrast, because excitation transfer theory suggests both positive and negative emotion can magnify negative judgments, misattribution of arousal was presumed to be the most plausible explanation. To test this presumption, we gathered photograph ratings provided by Ito, Cacioppo, and Lang (1998). These included mean ratings of arousal (activation), valence (pleasantness), dominance, positivity, negativity, and ambivalence elicited by the photos. By averaging the arousal ratings for

² Disgust (D-3110, D-3250, D-7360, D-9300, D-9320, D-9570), fear (F-1110, F-1113, F-1301, F-1302, F-1930, F-1931, F-5970), sadness/grief (S-2205, S-2490, S-2900, S-3220, S-9520, S-9530), positive excitement (E-8030, E-8031, E-8034, E-8200, E-8220, E-8370, E-8400), and neutral photographs (N-7150, N-7034, N-7040, N-7009, N-7080, N-7025, N-7235) are available on the IAPS website.

³ The Burglary Scenario involved a vivid individual victim (perpetrator's neighbor!). The Money Laundering Scenario described illegitimate handling of finances less directly linked to a concrete human victim. Emotion may be perceived as more informative when participants rate the immorality of a behavior involving a concrete human victim.

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