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## Does modifying personal responsibility moderate the mental contamination effect?



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### ABSTRACT

**Background and objectives:** Mental contamination is the psychological sense of internal dirtiness that arises in the absence of physical contact with a perceived contaminant. Mental contamination can be evoked through imagining perpetrating a moral transgression. This study experimentally evoked mental contamination by asking men to imagine perpetrating a non-consensual kiss. It explored whether reducing sense of personal responsibility for the kiss moderated the mental contamination effect.

**Methods:** Male students (N = 60) imagined giving either a consensual or non-consensual kiss. Personal responsibility for the kiss was manipulated in one of two non-consensual kiss conditions by way of the inclusion of social influence information. Feelings of mental contamination were assessed by self-report and through a behavioural index.

**Results:** Mental contamination was successfully induced in the two non-consensual kiss conditions. There was evidence to support the hypothesis that reducing personal responsibility might moderate specific components of mental contamination (shame, dirtiness and urge to cleanse). The effect of responsibility modification was evident in the self-report measures, but not in the behavioural index.

**Limitations:** The sample comprised male university students which limits generalizability of the findings. The behavioural assessment of mental contamination was limited to a proxy measure.

**Conclusions:** Imagined moral violations are associated with increases in indices of mental contamination. Further research should investigate whether feelings of shame, dirtiness and urge to cleanse are particularly responsive to responsibility modifications.

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### 1. Introduction

Mental contamination is defined as the psychological sense of internal dirtiness. It is distinct from contact contamination as it arises in the absence of direct contact with a perceived contaminant (Rachman, 2006). A sense of internal dirtiness or pollution may be caused by either a physical or a psychological violation of human origin (Rachman, Coughtrey, Shafran, & Radomsky, 2015). For example, feelings of internal dirtiness/pollution are often experienced at the time of a sexual assault, and these feelings can be re-evoked through recalling memories of the assault subsequently. Mental contamination is characterised by feelings of internal dirtiness that persist long after a violation has occurred and likely overlaps with the phenomenology of post-traumatic stress disorder (Rachman et al., 2015). Mental contamination may also

arise through psychological violation such as being degraded, humiliated or betrayed by another person, and it may also arise through self-contamination (Rachman et al., 2015) such as in the experience of unwanted negative intrusions with moral themes such as self-generated blasphemous, sexual and/or violent thoughts (Elliott & Radomsky, 2012). This form of mental contamination overlaps with obsessive-compulsive disorder, although not all obsessions evoke feelings of mental contamination (Rachman et al., 2015).

Research suggests that the feeling of internal dirtiness characteristic of mental contamination is accompanied by a range of negative emotions including disgust (Fairbrother, Newth, & Rachman, 2005), anxiety (Elliott & Radomsky, 2009), guilt, shame and anger (Rachman, Radomsky, Elliott, & Zysk, 2012). Given that mentally contaminated individuals appear visibly clean but sense dirtiness beneath their skin (Lee et al., 2013), mental contamination results in attempts to neutralise (e.g., by cleansing/washing) the sense of contamination (Jung & Steil, 2011). However, since the

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source of contamination is impossible to localise, attempts at cleansing are invariably ineffective (Fairbrother et al., 2005).

Much past research has attempted to induce mental contamination in non-clinical samples using the 'dirty-kiss' experiment (Fairbrother et al., 2005). In summary, this paradigm asks participants to imagine being the recipient of a non-consensual kiss. Feelings of mental contamination are measured before and after the task. Past research suggests this paradigm effectively induces a range of negative emotions and neutralising behaviours associated with mental contamination (Fairbrother et al., 2005). However, most evidence accumulated using this paradigm has recruited female undergraduate samples and has tended to focus on the recipients (i.e. 'victims') of non-consensual experiences.

Mental contamination in imagined 'perpetrators' of a moral transgression has received relatively less empirical attention. Theoretically, imagining committing such a transgression might evoke moral disgust and, as a result, feelings of contamination. Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000) proposed that immoral acts that are a reminder of a person's animal-nature (i.e. those involving sex) are more likely to be labelled 'disgusting' than violations that do not carry this connotation. Moreover, exposure to animal-reminder moral violations is as contaminating as exposure to contagious illness with the function of disgust being to guard against impurity (Rozin et al., 2000).

The available evidence suggests that 'perpetrators' are susceptible to the mental contamination effect in a similar way to 'victims'. Rachman et al. (2012) found that male participants who imagined giving a non-consensual kiss to a woman reported greater feelings of state anxiety, disgust, shame, guilt and anger than participants who imagined sharing a consensual kiss with a woman. Furthermore, manipulating the perceived level of betrayal (e.g. the woman depicted was the sister of the participant's best friend) amplified the mental contamination effect. In a later study, Waller and Boschen (2014) successfully evoked the mental contamination response in imagined female perpetrators of a non-consensual kiss on an underage boy. Interestingly, no neutralisation strategy (e.g. washing, atonement) was more effective than a control group (e.g. imagining standing on a busy street corner watching cars go past) in reducing mental contamination. Taken together, these research findings support Rachman's (2004) assertion that imagined perpetrators experience mental contamination. However, they also raise a question as to how the mental contamination effect might be attenuated. A limited amount of research has investigated individual differences in mental contamination sensitivity (Radomsky & Elliott, 2009) or explored factors that might moderate the mental contamination effect (Berman, Wheaton, Fabricant, & Abramowitz, 2012). The current study was designed to assess whether giving the participant an opportunity to reduce their sense of personal responsibility for a violation might attenuate the mental contamination effect.

Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) offers a potentially useful theoretical framework in considering the variability of the mental contamination effect. Drawing on attribution theory, Snyder and Higgins (1988) developed and tested an account of the ways in which individuals can maintain a positive self-image in the face of ego threat (termed making 'excuses'). Snyder and Higgins proposed that the function of making excuses is to shift the perceived location of the cause of negative acts from "sources that are relatively more central to the person's sense of self to sources that are relatively less central" (p 23). By attributing the cause of bad behaviour externally to a situational factor, threat to self is distanced and, as a result, a positive personal image is maintained. Subsequent work supports these ideas, demonstrating that when an individual attributes negative personal behaviour to internal (i.e. to the self rather than the situation), stable (where behaviour is not

considered context-specific) and global (where behaviour is considered a general representation across contexts) causes, shame is more likely to be experienced (Stuewig, Tangney, Heigel, Harty, & McCloskey, 2010). Shame arises because internal, stable and global attributions made following immoral behaviour promote a sense of feeling worthless (Stuewig et al., 2010). Research suggests that the propensity to experience shame is evident in psychological difficulties in which mental contamination may be a feature (e.g. OCD, PTSD; Ferguson, Stegge, Eyre, Vollmer, & Ashbaker, 2000). Extrapolating from attribution theory and Snyder and Higgins' (1998) work, shifting the causal locus externally is likely to have the effect of reducing sense of personal responsibility for the act or outcome in question.

Salkovskis' (1985) proposal that an inflated sense of personal responsibility is an important precipitating and maintaining factor in OCD has received extensive empirical support in the literature. According to Salkovskis' (1985) model, negative intrusions of committing an immoral act (in the absence of actual immoral conduct) become problematic when appraised by the individual as having personal significance (e.g. if the individual perceives that they are responsible for the content of the intrusion). Similarly, in their cognitive model, Rachman et al. (2015) underscore the importance of appraisal of the personal significance of the perceived violation as a determinant of the mental contamination response. For example, if a perceived violation is appraised as indicating that the person is bad or dangerous, feelings of disgust, contamination and anxiety are likely to result. Taken together, the aforementioned models support the proposal that those who imagine committing a moral violation are likely to feel a greater sense of mental contamination (e.g. sense of dirtiness, disgust, shame, urge to cleanse) if they think they are solely responsible for the imagined situation compared to those who are able to diffuse their sense of responsibility in some way.

The purpose of the current study was to assess whether mental contamination can be elicited in male participants who imagine committing a moral transgression, and whether the provision of social influence information (designed to reduce sense of personal responsibility for a moral transgression) moderates the mental contamination effect. In the current study, mental contamination was assessed with self-report indices and a behavioural measure (choice of a cleansing-related or neutral free gift).

## 1.1. Hypotheses

**1.0.** Participants who imagine giving a non-consensual kiss will (a) report a greater increase in mental contamination, and (b) more often choose a cleansing-related free gift than men who imagine giving a consensual kiss.

**2.0.** Participants who are not provided with a potential way to reduce their personal responsibility for giving a non-consensual kiss will (a) report a greater increase in mental contamination, and (b) more often choose a cleansing-related free gift than men who are provided with a potential way to reduce their personal responsibility for giving a non-consensual kiss.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design

The design of the current study was based on that conducted by Rachman et al. (2012) although departed from this study in two main ways. Similar to Rachman et al., the general scheme of the

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