



Sex matters: Examination of disgust and morality judgments of transgressions committed by homosexuals and heterosexuals



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ABSTRACT

Although homosexuality can evoke disgust, the extent to which disgust influences judgments about transgressions committed by homosexuals remains unclear. To address this knowledge gap, participants high (HHD) and low (LHD) in homosexual disgust provided disgust and immorality ratings of offenses committed by homosexuals or heterosexuals. The present study also examined the extent to which judgments about violations of social mores by homosexuals or heterosexuals differed as a function of the purity of the violation. Consistent with predictions, HHD participants had significantly higher disgust and immorality ratings than LHD participants for violations committed by homosexuals. However, the two groups did not differ in ratings of violations committed by heterosexuals. The findings also revealed that the difference between violations committed by homosexuals and heterosexuals in disgust was greater when the violation did not contain impurity versus when impurity was present. However, this pattern of findings was not observed for differences in ratings of immorality. Lastly, pathogen, but not sexual or moral disgust mediated the association between moral purity and ratings of violations committed by homosexuals. This mediated effect was not observed for ratings of violations committed by heterosexuals. The implications of these findings for better understating moral perceptions of homosexuality are discussed.

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There is increasing emphasis on the role of disgust in guiding moral judgments (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). In fact, labeling certain activities as disgusting appears to be an effective strategy for reducing their occurrence, as it leads to internalization of their immorality (Rozin & Singh, 1999). Experimental research has shown that experiencing trait and state disgust results in harsher moral judgments (Jones & Fitness, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). The link between experiencing disgust and moral condemnation may be especially robust when evaluating the behavior of various social out-groups. Indeed, experienced disgust is a strong predictor of negative attitudes towards foreigners, immigrants, and morally deviant groups (Tapias, Glaser, Keltner, Vasquez, & Wickens, 2007). Contact with social out-groups may trigger feelings of disgust, which in turn can be alleviated by physical cleansing. It is not surprising then that disgust has been linked with the moral foundation of purity (Koleva, Graham, Ditto, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012). This moral foundation reflects value of chastity, control of desires, and respect for “the sacredness” of things or their immaterial value.

Purity violations have also been defined as actions that go against the natural order of things (Rozin, Markwith, & McCauley, 1994),

which is a primary reason that many object to homosexuality. Empirical evidence linking disgust and homosexuality has been fairly consistent. For example, research has shown that disgust sensitivity (DS) correlates with implicit negative moral attitudes towards homosexuals (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010). Disgust inductions have also been found to result in less favorable evaluations of homosexuals (Adams, Stewart, & Blanchar, 2014; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012). The demonstrated effect of experienced disgust on negative judgments about homosexuality also appears to be unique to disgust. For example, Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, and Hunsinger (2009) found that induced disgust, but not anger, resulted in more negative implicit attitudes towards homosexuality.

Although the available evidence has implicated disgust in judgments about homosexuality, it is unclear if preexisting disgust responses towards homosexuality shift judgments about transgressions committed by individuals that are homosexual. A related question is if such a shift is limited to disgust responses to transgressions committed by homosexuals or if such a shift in judgment also extends to how morally wrong the transgressions are perceived to be. The answer to this important question may depend, in part, on the nature of the transgressions. Disgust has been found to influence moral judgments about purity violations, but not fairness violations (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009). Given that the gay stereotype is characterized by concerns of impurity (e.g. ‘diseased’), impurity violations (e.g., urinating

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on someone's car) committed by homosexuals may be evaluated as more disgusting and morally wrong than violations unrelated to purity (e.g., keying someone's car).

It is unclear if preexisting disgust responses towards homosexuality shift judgments about transgressions committed by individuals that are homosexual. Based on the existing literature (e.g., Adams et al., 2014; Inbar et al., 2012), we argue that those experiencing high disgust towards homosexuals may think negatively about them and look for reasons to negatively evaluate them on other mores violations. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the extent to which preexisting levels of disgust towards homosexuality biases ones evaluation of transgressions committed by homosexuals compared to those committed by heterosexuals. It was predicted that those high in homosexual disgust would rate violations committed by homosexuals as more disgusting and morally wrong than participants low in homosexual disgust. However, the two groups were not predicted to differ on ratings of violations committed by heterosexuals. It was also predicted that purity violations committed by homosexuals would be evaluated as more disgusting and morally wrong than violations unrelated to purity, especially among those high in homosexual disgust. Lastly, exploratory analyses were conducted to examine the extent to which the association between the foundation of moral purity and disgust and moral judgments of homosexual transgressions are mediated by pathogen, sexual, or moral disgust sensitivity.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants high ($N = 33$) and low ($N = 34$) in homosexual disgust were selected from undergraduate psychology and participated in this study in exchange for course credit. This sample was selected from a large pool ($N = 549$) of undergraduate participants that were screened on the basis of their mean disgust response to the following five homosexual acts: seeing two homosexuals kissing, hearing two homosexuals having sex, watching a gay pornography, finding out that someone of the same sex has sexual fantasies about you, a stranger of the same sex intentionally rubbing your thigh in an elevator). The final sample size was determined as the number of participants that agreed to participate from the available pool. Disgust responses to the homosexual acts were assessed on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). The high homosexual disgust (HHD) group met the following criteria: scoring one or more standard deviations above the mean in disgust responses to the homosexual acts ($M = 6.45, SD = 0.38$). The low homosexual disgust (LHD) group met the following criteria: scoring one or more standard deviations below the mean in disgust responses to the homosexual acts ($M = 0.93, SD = 0.46$).

1.2. Measures

The *Three Domains of Disgust Scale* (TDDS; Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009) is a 20-item measure of disgust across three domains: *pathogen disgust*, *sexual disgust*, and *moral disgust*.

The *Moral Foundations Questionnaire* (MFQ30; Graham et al., 2011) assesses to what extent individuals use various moral foundations in their moral decision-making. Specifically, moral concerns for *Fairness*, *Harm Avoidance*, *Ingroup Loyalty*, *Obedience to Authority*, and *Purity* are assessed.

The *Heterosexual Attitudes Toward Homosexuals* (HATH; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980) is a 20-item measure of attitudes about homosexuals, including rights of homosexuals, the labeling of homosexuality, and willingness to associate with homosexuals.

1.2.1. Moral transgressions

Twenty descriptions of transgressions that resulted in harm were designed for the present study (See Appendix A). Half of the violations

contained an element of impurity, while the other half did not. To indicate the sexual orientation of the actor, a reference was made to his or her romantic partner. An example of an impurity transgression with an actor and same-sex partner is: "After he finished biking with his partner, Jack urinated on someone's car door handle." An example of a no impurity transgression with an actor and an opposite sex partner is: "Natalie tampered with evidence in the courtroom before she met her husband for lunch." Thus, half of the perpetrators were described as homosexual and the other perpetrators were described as heterosexual for both impurity and no impurity transgressions.

1.2.2. Morality and disgust ratings

Participants were asked to rate how immoral they found each transgressor on a scale from 0 (not immoral at all) to 7 (extremely immoral). They were also asked to indicate how disgusting they found each transgressor on a scale from 0 (not at all disgusting) to 7 (extremely disgusting).

1.2.3. Behavioral disgust task

After rating all 20 moral transgressions, participants were offered hand sanitizer. This behavioral measure was included to obtain an implicit measure of disgust induction less likely affected by participant impression management concerns.

1.3. Procedure

Participants were first screened in large classrooms on levels of homosexual disgust. Those high and low in homosexual disgust were then invited to the lab on a subsequent date to complete the study. Upon arrival to the lab participants were informed that the study aimed to "measure how people judge the behaviors of others." After informed consent was obtained, all participants rated each moral transgression in terms of immorality and disgust. The order of the vignettes, as well as sexual orientation of the actor was randomized. After rating all 20 transgressions, participants were then offered sanitizer for their hands. The experimenter then recorded whether or not the participant used the hand sanitizer. This was employed as a behavioral measure of disgust proneness. Immediately after, participants completed the above-mentioned measures and were debriefed.

2. Results

2.1. Manipulation checks for pre-existing differences

HHD and LHD participants did not significantly differ ($p > 0.05$) in age ($M = 19.35, SD = 1.20$), gender (% Female = 72), or ethnicity (% Caucasian = 74). A higher percentage of participants in the HHD group (66%) chose to use hand sanitizer compared to those in the LHD group (41%) after providing morality and disgust ratings of the moral transgressions ($\chi^2 = 4.0, p < 0.05$). Participants in the HHD group reported higher levels of pathogen disgust ($M = 20.21, SD = 5.50$ vs. $M = 15.87, SD = 6.21$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$) and sexual disgust ($M = 20.06, SD = 5.95$ vs. $M = 13.75, SD = 6.10$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.22$) compared to those in the LHD group ($p < 0.01$). However, the HHD and LHD participants did not significantly differ in moral disgust ($M = 15.00, SD = 6.74$ vs. $M = 13.34, SD = 5.39$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$), as assessed by the TDDS ($p > 0.05$). The two groups also did not significantly differ in the moral foundations of harm avoidance ($M = 17.96, SD = 3.99$ vs. $M = 17.15, SD = 6.29$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$) and fairness ($M = 18.93, SD = 3.58$ vs. $M = 17.50, SD = 4.84$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$) ($p > 0.05$). However, participants in the HHD group endorsed greater concern for the moral foundations of ingroup loyalty ($M = 18.60, SD = 3.66$ vs. $M = 16.00, SD = 3.68$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.11$), obedience to authority ($M = 19.69, SD = 4.02$ vs. $M = 16.96, SD = 3.92$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$), and purity ($M = 21.45, SD = 4.52$ vs. $M = 17.09, SD = 5.06$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$) compared to those in the LHD group ($p < 0.01$). Participants in the HHD group also reported significantly less tolerant attitudes

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