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Avoiding cultural contamination: Intergroup disgust sensitivity and religious identification as predictors of interfaith threat, faith-based policies, and islamophobia

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ABSTRACT

In three samples of Christian undergraduate students ($n = 43$, $n = 115$, $n = 73$), we investigated the relative influence of Christian religious identification and intergroup disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS; an affect-laden individual difference variable reflecting reactivity to disgust and revulsion reactions toward outgroups) on several religious variables: Perceived threat of religious outgroups, attitudes toward faith-based schooling, intercultural child adoption, banning of religious symbols, and Islamophobia. Results revealed that religious identification and ITG-DS are both relevant to interfaith prejudices, but in different ways. With respect to unique predictive effects, ITG-DS emerged as the stronger and more consistent predictor. Meta-analytic integration confirmed that ITG-DS, but not religious identification, robustly predicts Islamophobia. Implications for understanding correlates of religious outgroup prejudices are considered.

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1. Introduction

Islamophobia is pervasive in many Western nations (Geddes, 2013; PEW, 2015). The so-called "clash of cultures" associated with increasing religious and ethnic diversity in the West has elicited debates concerning social policies and customs, with a prominent focus on the difference between traditional-Christian values and practices with those of Muslims. Much of this pushback is rooted in *social identity* concerns. As an example, Stephen Harper (Conservative Prime Minister of Canada, 2006–2015) campaigned for re-election in 2015 on a promise to prevent Muslim women from wearing a full face veil during citizenship ceremonies, despite a Federal court ruling this action as unconstitutional. In Harper's words: "We do not allow people to cover their faces during citizenship ceremonies. Why would Canadians, contrary to our own values, embrace a practice at that time that is not transparent, that is not open and frankly is rooted in a culture that is anti-women" (Chase, 2015). Aside from identity concerns, however, those pushing for restrictions on Muslim practices (e.g., wearing a headscarf, Welch, 2007) are also seemingly *repulsed* (or *disgusted*) by such customs. In the present study, we investigate the role of both Christian religious identification and intergroup disgust sensitivity as predictors of perceived threat of religious outgroups, attitudes toward faith-based

schooling, cross-cultural child adoption, banning of religious symbols, and Islamophobia.

1.1. Religious identification

Religious differences are pervasive in intergroup conflicts (Wellman & Tokuno, 2004), including the Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland and the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. The role of religion in intergroup prejudice has been explored in several ways. For instance, religious fundamentalism, or the belief that there is one true religious teaching to abide by, is associated with intolerance toward outgroups (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, 2004), whereas other approaches to religion (intrinsic and journey-oriented quest) are associated with lower prejudice (Allport & Ross, 1967; Hall, Matz, & Wood, 2010; Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Our focus is on degree of identification with one's religious group, given the importance of social identity in intergroup relations.

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), identifying with one's religious ingroup fosters ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias, including outgroup prejudice and hostility (see Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). In a study of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell and Hewstone (2006) showed that Catholics and Protestants who more strongly identified with their religious ingroup showed greater prejudice toward Protestants and Catholics, respectively. Similarly, non-Muslims in Britain who strongly identified as Christian reported greater Islamophobia

(Hewstone, Clare, Newheiser, & Voci, 2011; see also Johnson, Rowatt, & Labouff, 2012). Additionally, people who strongly identify with their religious ingroup are more opposed to interfaith relationships (see Cila & Lalonde, 2014; Haji, Lalonde, Durbin, & Naveh-Benjamin, 2011). Hence, strong religious identifiers are expected to be more threatened by and prejudicial toward religious outgroups. Consequently, those strongly identifying as Christian are expected to experience greater interfaith threat and be more opposed to pro-interfaith policies and practices. Yet strong identifiers are expected to be supportive of policies and practices that highlight religious affiliation as such policies and practices reinforce a positive religious identity and emphasize faith-based group differences.

Notably, religious identification is primarily concerned with importance of the *ingroup* particularly. However, aversion and disgust toward the *outgroup*, and fear of contamination by the *outgroup*, are theoretically germane to interfaith prejudice. Thus, in addition to considering social identification with one's religious ingroup as a predictor of prejudice, we introduce a previously untested predictor, the possibility that interfaith prejudice may also stem from a more fundamentally affective or visceral source.

1.2. Intergroup disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS)

It is well established that emotions underlie prejudice (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Mackie & Smith, 2002). Following Allport (1954), who primarily focused on the power of aggression, fear, and anxiety as underlying prejudice, researchers have traditionally investigated fear and anxiety (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). For instance, intergroup anxiety, or the tendency to experience uncertainty about how to behave toward members of outgroups and subsequent uneasiness and discomfort, is a robust predictor of prejudice (Stephan, 2014).

More recently, disgust has emerged as a fundamental affective construct in understanding prejudice and intergroup attitudes (Hodson & Costello, 2007; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Olatunji, 2008; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010). Disgust is a basic emotion characterized by revulsion, withdrawal, and avoidance (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000; Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, & Imada, 1997), including avoidance of specific outgroups as a way to protect oneself (e.g., from foreigners who might carry diseases; Schaller & Park, 2011). Of particular interest to the present research, people differ in their general disgust sensitivity (Haidt et al., 1994; Olatunji, Haidt, McKay, & David, 2008). Witnessing a person being physically ill, for instance, will be perceived as more or less disgusting depending on a person's sensitivity to disgust. Yet evidence for a link between *general* disgust sensitivity and prejudice is rather weak and mixed (see Choma, Hodson, & Costello, 2012; Hodson et al., 2013; Hodson, Dube, & Choma, 2015).

Recently, Hodson and colleagues (Choma et al., 2012; Hodson et al., 2013) proposed that people differ in *intergroup* disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS). ITG-DS can be defined as "an affect-laden construct reflecting individual differences in the tendency to experience disgust and revulsion reactions toward … outgroups" (Choma et al., 2012, p. 500). Individuals higher in ITG-DS are more disgusted and repulsed by the beliefs or practices of outgroups, and seek to avoid contamination from outgroups. ITG-DS predicts prejudice toward diverse groups including Muslims, Jews, gays/lesbians, ethnic minorities, and Blacks; impressively ITG-DS predicts such prejudice, even when controlling for robust ideological and affective predictors (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, intergroup anxiety) and general disgust sensitivity (Choma et al., 2012; Hodson et al., 2013). Furthermore, Hodson et al. (2013) demonstrated that experimentally-induced outgroup disgust only predicted prejudice among individuals higher (vs. lower) in ITG-DS. Given that individuals higher in ITG-DS experience more revulsion in response to outgroups, individuals higher (vs. lower) in ITG-DS might be threatened by faith-based outgroups. Moreover, to avoid

contamination, such individuals may be opposed to social policies and practices promoting interfaith contact, and be supportive of policies and practices that promote the segregation of faith groups. In other words, those higher in ITG-DS are expected to be particularly interested in keeping outgroups away – both physically and symbolically.

1.3. The present research

The relative influence of religious identification and ITG-DS on interfaith-related attitudes was investigated in three samples. In addition to perceived threat and Islamophobia, four faith-based policy attitudes were assessed: Attitudes toward faith-based schooling, opposition to diversity education, preference to ban religious symbols, and attitudes toward cross-cultural child adoption. Given that these attitudes are relevant to the ingroup as well as highlight possible contamination from intergroup contact, we hypothesized that religious identification and ITG-DS would predict greater interfaith threat, opposition to diversity education and cross-cultural child adoption, and greater Islamophobia. We also tested (Sample 1 only) whether religious identification and ITG-DS related to greater implicitly-measured anti-Muslim attitudes (Heiphetz, Spelke, & Banaji, 2013, Study 1). Finally, we expected that religious identification would particularly relate to support for policies like faith-based schooling and opposition to banning religious symbols as such policies serve to strengthen faith group affiliation. Conversely, we expected that ITG-DS would relate to opposition to faith-based schooling and support for banning religious symbols as these policies seek to support religious outgroups.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Christian undergraduate participants from three post-secondary institutions in southern Ontario (Canada) participated in exchange for course credit: **Sample 1** ($n = 43$; $mean_{age} = 22.88$, $SD = 8.19$; 86% female; 90.7% identified as White; religious affiliation: 39.5% Catholic, 18.6% Baptist, 14% Protestant, 9.2% Christian Other, 7% United, 4.7% Anglican, 4.6% each Lutheran and Pentecostal); **Sample 2** ($n = 115$; $mean_{age} = 19.58$, $SD = 4.44$; 86.0% female; ethnicity: 51.3% White, 17.4% other, 16.5% Filipino, 7.0% Chinese, 3.5% Black, 2.6% East Indian, 1.8% West Asian/Middle Easter or Other Asian; religious affiliation: 72.2% Catholic, 11.3% each Protestant and Christian Other, 3.5% Baptist, 1.7% Anglican); and **Sample 3**[1] ($n = 73$; $mean_{age} = 19.79$, $SD = 3.61$; 87.7% female; ethnicity: 78.1% White, 11% Black, 11.0% other, 2.7% Filipino; religious affiliation: 67.1% Catholic, 13.7% each Protestant and Non-Denominational, 2.7% each Orthodox and Christian Other). Participants completed measures of ITG-DS, religious identification, perceived interfaith threat, interfaith attitudes, and Islamophobia using response scales from 1-*strongly disagree* to 7-*strongly agree* unless stated otherwise. In Sample 1, participants also completed a pro-Christian/Muslim-bias IAT.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Intergroup disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS)

Participants completed the 8-item Intergroup Disgust Sensitivity scale (Hodson et al., 2013). Items were modified to reflect an interfaith context by replacing "ethnic group" with "religious group" (e.g., "I feel disgusted when people from other religious groups invade my personal space", "After interacting with another religious group, I typically desire more contact with my own religious group to "undo" any ill effects from

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[1] After completing measures of ITG-DS, interfaith threat and religious identification, participants in Sample 3 were randomly assigned to an interfaith threat or control condition. The manipulation was uninfluential, with no between-condition differences on any outcomes.