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## Protect thyself: How affective self-protection increases self-interested, unethical behavior



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### ABSTRACT

In this research, we draw on the characteristics of disgust—an affective state that prompts a self-protection response—to demonstrate that experiencing disgust can also increase self-interested, unethical behaviors such as cheating. This series of studies contributes to the literature demonstrating context-specific effects on self-interested, unethical behavior. Specifically, we show that innocuous emotion-eliciting cues can elicit a focus on the protection of one's own welfare, leading people to engage in self-interested behaviors that are unethical. This research provides evidence that the importance of clean physical environments may extend beyond visual beautification of surroundings to include economic behaviors.

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### Introduction

Scholars such as Adam Smith (1776/1904) and Hume (1748/1902) argue self-interested behavior to be the bedrock of economic progress congruent with the common good. However, some self-interested behaviors may also be unethical given their inconsistency with more desirable virtuous behavior (e.g., Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics in Thomson (1955); Biblical Commandments in Browning (1879)) and violation of societal norms (Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Though not all self-interested behaviors are unethical, to the extent that a subset of self-interested behaviors can be unethical, our paper examines the latter. More specifically, we examine self-interested, unethical (SIU hereafter) behaviors whereby individuals cheat, thereby benefiting from being dishonest (Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008a, 2008b), consistent with behavioral ethics research (Treviño et al., 2006).<sup>1</sup> What causes people to engage in such SIU behaviors?

Research recognizes that SIU behaviors are sensitive to contextual factors (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Wiltermuth,

2011; Yang, Wu, Zhou, Mead, & Vohs, 2013). We add to this literature by examining how evoking an incidental affective state through physical disgust can influence SIU behavior. A large body of research shows that experiencing incidental affect influences decisions such as the amount one is willing to pay to receive or dispose of a commodity (Cryder, Lerner, Gross, & Dahl, 2008; Lerner, Small, & Loewenstein, 2004), risk estimates (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Winterich, Han, & Lerner, 2010), and punitive damages and punishments (Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998). How does affect, specifically disgust, influence SIU behavior?

To answer this question, we report four studies examining the impact of physical disgust on SIU behaviors. Following past research, we denote SIU behaviors as those that are morally unacceptable to the larger community (Jones, 1991) and result in personal gain (Gino & Pierce, 2009). Our studies are important in several ways. First, we extend a growing body of research that shows the context-specific nature of SIU behaviors (e.g., Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Gino & Margolis, 2011; Gino & Pierce, 2009; John, Loewenstein, & Rick, 2013; Yang et al., 2013; Zhong, Bohns, & Gino, 2010). More generally, we extend the set of potential factors influencing SIU behaviors to people's affective states, particularly an experience of disgust. Second, we provide insight into the mechanisms through which SIU behaviors may be motivated. Specifically, we demonstrate the mediating role of a self-protection focus that arises from disgust. Third, we show how such deleterious effects can be mitigated. In so doing, we contribute to the

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<sup>1</sup> We specify our focus is on unethical behaviors that are self-interested since some behaviors which violate societal norms and are thus deemed unethical are not self-interested (e.g., "The Heinz Dilemma" of stealing medicine to save a loved one, Kohlberg, 1963).

recent interest in effects of cleansing on decision-making (Lee & Schwarz, 2011) by demonstrating how subtle activities such as evaluating cleansing products can minimize the potentially deleterious effect of experiencing disgust on SIU behaviors. Our findings show why dirty environments can have policy implications that go beyond visual beautification of physical contexts.

### Self-Interested, Unethical (SIU) Behavior

Empirical studies have shown the prevalence and context sensitivity of SIU behaviors. In one study, self-interested behavior increased when the bet on a dice roll was written after rather than before the throw of the dice, even when the bet was only in participants' minds and rules could not be enforced (Jiang, 2013). In another study, using email rather than paper was found to increase the likelihood of lying to deceive others (Naquin, Kurtzberg, & Belkin, 2010). Gino and Pierce (2009) demonstrated that the presence of abundant wealth (vs. scarcity) increased overstatement of one's performance on an anagram task.

Other studies have examined the specific mechanisms through which context may operate. Yang et al. (2013) found that SIU behaviors (e.g., keeping more than half of the allocated money for oneself) in a variety of exchanges including the trust game, prisoner's dilemma, the ultimatum game, and the dictator game increased when people handled dirty (vs. clean) money. The authors proposed this dirty money effect occurred because handling dirty money lowers moral standards and reduces positive attitudes toward fairness and reciprocity, thereby increasing self-interested behavior. In another study, darkness induced by a dimly-lit (vs. well-lighted) room or through wearing sunglasses was found to increase dishonesty—a SIU behavior examined via self-reported solving of anagrams and allocations in the dictator game (Zhong, Bohns, et al., 2010). The authors reasoned that this effect of darkness may occur due to a feeling of illusory anonymity. It may also be the case that individuals in a dark environment behave with greater self-interest because of an increased need for self-protection triggered by darkness.

Consistent with this research, we examine whether experiencing disgust—an affective state—might also impact SIU behavior. Specifically, we argue that experiencing disgust, as a consequence of situational factors, can trigger self-interest within an individual. This is consistent with the notion that the evolutionary origins of disgust serve as a mechanism for self-protection (Curtis, Anger, & Rabie, 2004; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009). Our main theoretical argument is that the experience of physical disgust is a basic and primal emotion that elicits both physiological and psychological reactions aimed at self-protection (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985).

Darwin (1872/1965) proposed that physical disgust evolved to assist an individual to engage in self-protection via activities such as food selection and disease avoidance. Stated differently, disgust serves a biological function of self-preservation. Indeed, Fessler said, “the reason we experience these reactions [disgust] today is that the response protected our ancestors,” (Paul, 2010, p. 42). Consistent with this premise, an experience of physical disgust is associated with a self-protective response such as avoiding spoiled food or toxic substances (Olatunji, Haidt, McKay, & David, 2008; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008). When Chapman, Kim, Susskind, and Anderson (2009) had participants drink small samples of disgust-inducing (i.e., bitter, salty, and sour) liquids, participants' physiological responses included an increased tightening in the throat, a decreased heart rate, and activation of the *levator labii* muscle region of the face, all characteristic of an oral–nasal response aimed at self-protection.

Typically, physical disgust is evoked via stimuli such as an unpleasant, nauseating odor (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), dirty desks (Schnall, Haidt,

et al., 2008), or visual exposure to fecal matter and unclean restrooms (Lerner et al., 2004). These stimuli represent a potential for harm (e.g., through disease) and are likely to evoke a self-protection response. Thus, people may be conditioned to associate the experience of physical disgust, however mild, with a potential for harm to one's self, which then triggers a more general and automatic response to engage in self-protection (Lee & Ellsworth, 2012; Rozin et al., 2000, 2008). Researchers have suggested that this automatic, self-protective response emanating from disgust is not limited to physical protection (e.g., against disease) but also extends to psychological self-protection (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Sumio, 1997; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Rozin et al. (2000, p. 637) go so far as to “argue for a path of development in individuals and cultures that extends from the presumed origin of disgust as a rejection response to bad tastes, in the service of protecting the body, to a full range of elicitors . . . , more appropriately described as in the service of protecting the soul.” Overall, these arguments suggest that an experience of physical disgust is likely to manifest in physiological and psychological responses that are associated with a focus on protecting one's self.

Consistent with Rozin et al. (2000), we expect the notion of self to extend not only to the physical self, but also to one's self interest in an economic sense of self. Given this, we argue that self-protection focus, arising from the experience of physical disgust, manifests more broadly in terms of SIU behaviors (Larrick, 1993; Maddux & Rogers, 1983; Shogren & Crocker, 1991). In general, it has been found that those motivated by self-protection will tend to put their own interest above others to the extent of increased unethical behavior (Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Moreover, factors emphasizing self-interest are positively associated with unethical behaviors, at least in the workplace (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). Based on this, we argue that the increased focus on self-protection among people experiencing disgust should be associated with a greater likelihood among them to engage in SIU behaviors. Stated differently, we argue and expect that those experiencing disgust are more likely to act in unethical ways that promote self-interest because of their need for self-protection, compared to a control group of participants experiencing a neutral state.

### Overview of experimental evidence

These studies seek to investigate whether situational factors associated with an experience of disgust increase SIU behavior and whether this observed effect—consistent with our theorizing—is mediated via self-protection. For our theorizing about disgust increasing SIU behavior because of self-protection to be supported empirically, individuals exposed to situational factors associated with disgust should be more likely to display SIU behaviors that we consider to be cheating because individuals themselves benefit from being dishonest. These cheating behaviors include: (1) falsely reporting the outcome of a coin flip to gain monetary incentives (Experiment 1A), (2) deceiving partners to obtain more money (Experiments 1B and 3), and (3) reporting solving unsolvable anagrams for additional pay (Experiment 2). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that an affective state of physical disgust is associated with self-interested, unethical behavior (Experiment 1A, 1B, 2, 3), and this observed effect is mediated via self-protection (Experiment 2).

In Experiment 1A, we seek to demonstrate that the percentage of individuals reporting the outcome of their coin flip that assigned them to the incentive condition will be greater than chance (i.e., 50%) only for individuals experiencing disgust. In falsely reporting the outcome of the coin flip, participants experiencing disgust are behaving unethically and in a self-interested manner because they obtain the monetary incentive by being dishonest (about the

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