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Disgust sensitivity selectively predicts attitudes toward groups that threaten (or uphold) traditional sexual morality

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has linked disgust sensitivity to negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. We extend this existing research by examining the extent to which disgust sensitivity predicts attitudes more generally toward groups that threaten or uphold traditional sexual morality. In a sample of American adults ($N = 236$), disgust sensitivity (and particularly contamination disgust) predicted negative attitudes toward groups that threaten traditional sexual morality (e.g., pro-choice activists), and positive attitudes toward groups that uphold traditional sexual morality (e.g., Evangelical Christians). Further, disgust sensitivity was a weaker predictor of attitudes toward left-aligned and right-aligned groups whose objectives are unrelated to traditional sexual morality (e.g., gun-control/gun-rights activists). Together, these findings are consistent with a sexual conservatism account for understanding the relationship between disgust sensitivity and intergroup attitudes.

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1. Introduction

The emotion of disgust, which likely evolved to discourage us from ingesting noxious or dangerous substances (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008), also seems to play an important role in our moral, social, and political beliefs (Bloom, 2004; Nussbaum, 2001). People who are more readily disgusted are more likely to describe themselves as politically conservative (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009), and especially as socially conservative (Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010). They are also more negative toward a variety of social groups including immigrants, foreigners, and gays and lesbians. The link between disgust sensitivity and negative evaluations of gays and lesbians has been most firmly established—whereas a relationship between disgust sensitivity and negativity toward foreigners and immigrants has only been demonstrated in a single sample (Hodson & Costello, 2007), correlations between disgust sensitivity and anti-gay attitudes have been documented by independent labs across multiple samples (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar et al., 2009; Olatunji, 2008; Terrizzi et al., 2010).

Although there seems to be a reliable relationship between disgust sensitivity and anti-gay attitudes, the reason for this relationship is less clear. One possibility is that gay men and lesbians are seen as low-status outgroups, and that disgust leads to more negative evaluations of gay people at least in part because it strengthens intergroup boundaries, support for social hierarchies, and outgroup dehumanization (Hodson & Costello, 2007; Terrizzi et al., 2010; for a similar theoretical perspective see Nussbaum, 2001). Another possibility (which is not mutually exclusive with the hierarchy account) is that the relationship between disgust sensitivity and anti-gay attitudes is best explained by the fact that disgust-sensitive individuals have more conservative views about sex in general (Olatunji, 2008) – we call this the “sexual conservatism” account.

According to the sexual conservatism account, disgust sensitivity should predict attitudes toward *any* groups seen as threatening traditional (i.e., conservative) sexual morality. To date, however, there is no evidence linking trait differences in disgust sensitivity to attitudes toward sexual purity-threatening groups besides gay men and lesbians. There is, however, some suggestive support for this hypothesis. First, conservatives, more than liberals, see the upholding of sexual purity as a moral good (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007). Second, irrespective of political ideology, those who endorse spiritual and bodily purity as a moral value are more condemning of sexually licentious behavior (e.g., having casual sex or using pornography; Koleva, Graham,

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Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Third, differences in *state* levels of disgust are both a consequence and a cause of evaluations of some sexual behaviors. People tend to be disgusted by taboo sex (Haidt & Hersh, 2001), and those made to feel disgusted are more likely to say that unusual sexual behaviors—but not moral infractions unrelated to sex—are morally wrong (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009).

The sexual conservatism account also makes a related prediction: Greater disgust sensitivity should also be associated with *liking* of groups that uphold sexual purity. After all, if those who are more disgust-sensitive value traditional sexual norms, they should evaluate groups that defend or uphold those norms more positively. To date there is no evidence, direct or otherwise, for this hypothesis.

The sexual conservatism account, then, makes two as yet untested predictions: that disgust sensitivity will predict more negative attitudes toward a variety of groups seen as threatening traditional sexual morality; and more positive attitudes toward groups seen as upholding it. In the current research, we tested both of these predictions by asking people to rate a range of different social groups that we thought would be seen as either threatening or upholding traditional sexual morality. We also included groups typically associated with the political left and right, but *not* with sexual morality, to rule out the alternative explanation that any relationship between disgust sensitivity and attitudes toward sexual morality-associated groups could simply be the result of people liking politically similar groups (i.e., right-aligned groups for those high in disgust sensitivity) and disliking politically dissimilar groups (i.e., left-aligned groups for those high in disgust sensitivity).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited 236 U. S. residents for an online survey through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online labor market where researchers can recruit diverse samples of participants (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Well-established psychological findings have been replicated in MTurk samples (e.g., Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). Interested individuals selected a link to the survey and were compensated 50 cents.

2.2. Materials and procedure

Participants first completed the 36-item ACT scale (Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010) and a 4-item SDO scale (Pratto et al., 2013). These were assessed for exploratory purposes, but are not included in the primary analyses (see [Supplemental Materials](#) for analyses of these measures).

Participants then completed the 25-item Disgust Scale-Revised (DS-R; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994; modified by Olatunji et al., 2007), which contains subscales measuring three types of disgust: core (basic disgust elicitors such as vomit); contamination (interpersonal contagion threats such as drinking from someone else's soda); and animal-reminder (corpses and other sometimes "creepy" reminders that human bodies are like animals'). Participants indicated their agreement with 13 statements (e.g., "I never let any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public washroom") on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*), and rated how disgusting they would find 12 specific situations (e.g., "You take a sip of soda, and then realize that you drank from the glass that an acquaintance of yours had been drinking from") on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all disgusting*; 7 = *Very disgusting*).

Participants then completed feeling thermometer ratings for 18 different groups (in random order) on 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm) scales (with a neutral point of 50). Feeling thermometers are commonly used to measure intergroup attitudes (e.g. Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012; Sears & Henry, 2003; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). Based on a priori assumptions, we included five groups who threaten traditional sexual morality (young people who are sexually active, gays and lesbians, pro-gay activists, pro-choice activists, feminists), four groups who uphold traditional sexual morality (young people who wait until marriage to have sex, Evangelical Christians, anti-gay activists, pro-life activists), and three left-aligned groups (Occupy Wall Street, gun control activists, and illegal immigrants) and two right-aligned groups (Tea Party and gun rights activists) whose objectives are not directly related to traditional sexual morality. We also included feeling thermometer ratings of liberals, conservatives, Democrats, and Republicans. However, we exclude these groups from the sexual morality analyses because they are broad enough that they could be construed both as related and unrelated to traditional sexual morality.

On a separate page, participants then evaluated each group (again, in random order) for how much it threatens traditional sexual morality ("This group threatens traditional moral values about sex") on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Participants next were asked to place themselves on a 7-point political ideology scale (1 = *Extremely Liberal*; 7 = *Extremely Conservative*). They were also separately asked to indicate where they stood on "social policy," "economic policy," and "foreign policy" using the same 7-point scale. Finally, participants reported political party identification (1 = *Strong Democrat*; 7 = *Strong Republican*), religiosity, and demographic information (age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, education, and SES).

3. Results

3.1. Participant demographic information

Participants varied in their gender (54% female), ethnicity (74% White, 9% Black, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 5% other or mixed ethnic heritage), religion (43% Christian, 43% atheist or agnostic, 2% Jewish, 1% Muslim, 1% Hindu, 1% Buddhist, and 9% indicated "Other"), education (47% with at least a bachelor's degree, 36% with some college or an associate degree, and 17% with no education beyond high school), and SES (64% struggle to buy the things they need or have just enough, 36% have no problem buying the things they need). The average age was 37 years. On average, participants leaned to the political left (overall ideology $M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.61$; party identification $M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.59$).

3.2. Left- and right-aligned groups

We first verified that attitudes toward left- and right-aligned groups were predicted by the respondent's political ideology. As [Table 1](#) shows, this was the case: self-reported ideology predicted attitudes toward all 18 groups, all $ps < .001$.

3.3. Perceived threat to traditional sexual morality

We next tested whether our sexual-morality threatening groups were indeed seen as more threatening to traditional sexual morality. We created composite threat ratings for groups that threaten traditional sexual morality, groups that uphold traditional sexual morality, and both left-aligned and right-aligned groups not explicitly related to sexual morality. We submitted these composites to a repeated-measures ANOVA, which showed a significant

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