



Prejudice towards gay men and a need for physical cleansing[☆]



Agnieszka Golec de Zavala^{a,b,*}, Sven Waldzus^a, Marzena Cyprianska^c

^a Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), CIS-IUL, Avenida das Forças Armadas, Edifício ISCTE, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal

^b Goldsmiths, University of London, Lewisham Way, New Cross, London, Greater London SE14 6NW, UK

^c University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ul. Chodakowska 19/31, 03-815 Warsaw, Poland

HIGHLIGHTS

- Imagined contact with gay men increases need of physical cleansing.
- This need is specific to body parts engaged in the contact.
- This specific need is stronger among political conservatives.
- Manuscript finds and explains link between prejudice and physical contamination.
- Manuscript proposes a novel perspective on previous findings.

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ABSTRACT

The results of four studies suggest that contamination concerns involved in prejudice towards male homosexuals may be expressed in the increased need for physical cleansing after an imagined contact with a homosexual man. Participants in Study 1 completed word fragments according to the theme of cleansing, and in Study 2, they chose a cleansing wipe more often after imagining using a mobile phone of a homosexual (vs. heterosexual) man. The need for cleansing was specific to the body parts engaged in the contact. In Study 3, participants evaluated hand and mouth cleansing products as more desirable after imagining using a mobile phone of a homosexual (vs. heterosexual) man. The specific need for cleansing, but not the accessibility of cleansing related words, was more pronounced among political conservatives (Study 4). The results are discussed with reference to the behavioral immune system hypothesis, research on moral disgust, and the embodiment literature.

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Introduction

"What does your purity matter to me?"

[Federico Garcia Lorca]

Attributing impurity to people is a culturally universal way of expressing prejudice. The language of hostile propaganda associates targeted groups with contamination and uses the metaphor of physical cleansing to prescribe (and euphemize) the most desirable actions towards them (Keen, 1988). Homosexuals (especially male) are among

the social groups that have been most persistently framed as "unclean," and metaphorical prescription of cleansing has been used to justify discrimination against them (Herek, 2000). The laws of the Third Reich, for example, punished even homosexual fantasies. Male homosexuals were framed as "a plague". Through the politics of "purifying the race" German gay men were imprisoned, stigmatized (by a pink triangle on prison uniforms), abused (castrated, subjected to medical experiments), and eventually killed (Steakley, 1982).

The existence of a metaphorical link between the rejection of a social group and physical cleansing suggests that prejudice towards such a group may be associated with bodily reactions to physical contamination (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). This expectation is confirmed by psychological research. For instance, research has shown that prejudice towards homosexuals takes the specific form of feeling disgust (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005), which is an emotional reaction to bodily contamination (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Gay sexuality elicits disgust (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994; Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997), and individual sensitivity to interpersonal disgust (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009), core disgust and physical contamination concerns (Olatunji, 2008) predict anti-gay prejudice.

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK.

E-mail address: agnieszka.golec@gmail.com (A. Golec de Zavala).

Experimentally induced disgust increases dislike of homosexual men (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2012; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010), and implicit preference of heterosexuals over homosexuals (Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009). In addition, prejudice towards homosexuals is associated with the AIDS stigma and bodily contamination by disease (e.g., Herek, 2002). Homosexuals are perceived as “blameworthy” victims of AIDS more than any other affected social group (Herek, 2002; Herek & Capitano, 1999; Herek, Capitano, & Widaman, 2003).

There is ample evidence that physical contamination concerns are involved in anti-gay prejudice. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, no previous research has demonstrated that prejudice towards homosexuals may be experienced and expressed as a specific reaction to bodily contamination: the need for physical cleansing.

Psychological functions of physical cleansing

Physical cleansing provides basic protection against physical contamination, and so the need for physical cleansing should increase when contamination is experienced. There are also reasons to believe that physical cleansing reduces more than just the sense of physical pollution. For example, psychological and anthropological literature indicates that concepts of physical and moral purity are intertwined (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Nussbaum, 2004). One illustration of this can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, within which contamination by bodily disease indicated the lack of moral purity and has been seen as punishment for moral transgressions. Cleansing rituals and physical purification have been used to reestablish moral purity and cure the disease (Kazen, 2010).

Psychological research shows that cues of physical impurity such as bad smell or dirt increase the severity of moral judgments (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008) and physical cleanness decreases it (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008). Physical cleansing relieves the sense of contamination by moral transgressions (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006), and physical purity gives people feeling of higher moral grounds and elicits more harsh moral judgments (Zhong, Strejcek, & Sivanathan, 2010) especially with regard to violations of sexual purity (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011).

Physical cleansing signifies more than an attempt to achieve moral purity. It extends beyond the moral domain and serves to create psychological distance from the past (cf. Lee & Schwarz, 2011). Physical cleansing is also used to create social distance. Anthropological literature indicates that across different cultures the body is used as a metaphor of society, and rituals related to physical purity represent desired states of the in-group and desired actions towards purity-threatening out-groups (Douglas, 1966). Hygiene and purification rituals build in-group cohesion (Dunbar, 1993), differentiate between in-groups and out-groups (or in-caste or out-caste), and legitimize social hierarchies (with low status groups labeled as “impure” or “untouchable”) (e.g., Curtis, de Barra, & Aunger, 2011). To sum up, physical cleansing seems to serve multiple psychological functions. It can be expected that the need for physical cleansing may be evoked by fear of physical as well as symbolic contamination.

Prejudice towards homosexuals and contamination concerns

There are several reasons why prejudice towards homosexuals (especially male) may be expressed as a heightened need for physical cleansing. A need for physical cleansing may indicate a need to avoid physical or symbolic contamination. Research suggests that a social group defined by male homosexual orientation is construed as a threat to physical and moral purity. There are also reasons to think that this group is construed as a threat to the purity of the very essence defining heterosexuals as a social group.

It has been argued that homosexuality is associated with physical disgust because homosexuals violate traditional rules of “appropriate”

sexual behaviors and threaten moral purity (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Dasgupta et al., 2009; Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, et al., 2009; Inbar et al., 2012). Contamination in a moral rather than a physical sense underlies this explanation. According to this perspective, prejudice towards homosexuals involves a notion of symbolic contamination that causes reactions on a physical level.

Another explanation for why disgust is associated with homosexuality relies on the fact that disgust is an evolved emotional reaction that cues reactions to prevent physical contamination by pathogens (e.g., Curtis et al., 2011; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009; Rozin et al., 2000). Thus, the association of anti-gay prejudice with disgust indicates that prejudice towards this group involves evolved psychological and physical mechanisms to prevent physical contamination.

According to this evolutionary perspective some forms of prejudice are driven by an evolved mechanism that allowed our ancestors to detect potentially threatening features of other people and respond in threat-reducing ways. The cost of infection by parasites, bacteria or viruses was one of the most important selection pressures faced by early humans (Kurzman & Leary, 2001). Therefore, natural selection has produced a behavioral immune system that comprises psychological and social mechanisms that facilitate the detection and avoidance of pathogens. In human societies, such evolved reactions are assumed to play a role in avoidance of people who are seen as a health threat, for instance because they bear atypical appearances or are unfamiliar and may therefore carry new germs or engage in practices that challenge the hygienic and health standards of the in-group (e.g., Curtis et al., 2011; Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2011; Schaller & Neuberg, 2012; Schaller & Park, 2011). This approach suggests that prejudice towards homosexuals may be expressed as the need for cleansing based on an atavistic mechanism aiming at reducing actual, physical contamination by germs because homosexuals are either seen as different and unfamiliar or because they are associated with the stigma of a disease (e.g., Herek et al., 2003).

Another approach suggesting that symbolic rejection of a social group may be co-experienced with bodily reactions to physical contamination can be found in embodiment research. Research indicates that representations of the self and in-groups overlap. In-group identification is expressed by including the in-group in the mental representation of the self (e.g., Coats, Smith, Claypool, & Banner, 2000; Schubert & Otten, 2002; Smith, 2008; Tropp & Wright, 2001). In addition, similar others are included into one's representation of the bodily self. For example, Paladino, Mazzurega, Pavani, and Schubert (2010) demonstrated that being stroked on a cheek while observing a stranger being stroked in synchrony increased perceived physical resemblance to and conformity with the stranger and the inclusion of the stranger in the self. These effects were mediated by the illusion of physical ownership and control over the stranger's face. Thus, there are reasons to believe that similar others who constitute an in-group may be included in representations of bodily self.

If representations of the physical self and the in-group overlap, then contact with an out-group that is construed as incompatible with the essence of the in-group may be experienced as physical contamination of one's body. Studies show that social categories defined by sexual orientations are seen as defined by different underlying essences and often perceived as different “natural kinds” (e.g., Haslam & Levy, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002). In addition, the more heterosexual people essentialize differences between the social categories defined by sexual orientations and believe that they are demarcated by clear-cut, not crossable boundaries and that profound differences exist in their underlying essences, the more they dislike and avoid homosexuals (Haslam & Levy, 2006). This suggests that sexual minorities may be construed as contaminating the essence of an in-group defined by a heterosexual orientation. Contaminating intergroup contact should produce a corresponding embodied state: the increase of a need for physical cleansing (Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric,

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