



The role of intergroup disgust in predicting negative outgroup evaluations[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Introduce intergroup disgust concept (repulsion toward social outgroups).
- ▶ Develop individual difference measure and establish reliability and validity.
- ▶ Manipulate group-relevant disgust, determine causal effects, mediators, moderators.
- ▶ Intergroup disgust sensitivity moderates disgust reaction-to-attitudes effect.

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ABSTRACT

We introduce intergroup disgust as an individual difference and contextual manipulation. As an individual difference, intergroup disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS) represents affect-laden revulsion toward social outgroups, incorporating beliefs in stigma transfer and social superiority. Study 1 (5 samples, $N = 708$) validates the ITG-DS scale. Higher ITG-DS scorers demonstrated greater general disgust sensitivity, disease concerns, authoritarian/conservative ideologies, and negative affect. Greater ITG-DS correlated with stronger outgroup threat perceptions and discrimination, and uniquely predicted negative outgroup attitudes beyond well-established prejudice-predictors. Intergroup disgust was experimentally manipulated in Study 2, exposing participants ($n = 164$) to a travel blog concerning contact with a disgust-evoking (vs. neutral) outgroup. Manipulated disgust generated negative outgroup evaluations through greater threat and anxiety. This mediation effect was moderated: Those higher (vs. lower) in ITG-DS did not experience stronger disgust, threat, or anxiety reactions, but demonstrated stronger translation of aversive reactions (especially outgroup threat) into negative attitudes. Theory development and treatment implications are considered.

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Introduction

Repulsive. Reviled. Repugnant. Unsavory. These terms characterize negative affective reactions to disgust-eliciting stimuli (e.g., vomit or fecal matter). They can also characterize reactions to other people, not only foreigners, but also members of low-status and marginalized groups. That is, we can readily react to outsiders as “disgusting.” Yet prejudice researchers have only recently systematically contemplated disgust in intergroup relations, focusing instead on anxiety (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Stephan & Stephan, 1985) or fear (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). We introduce the implications of intergroup disgust – a negative affective reaction to social outgroups characterized by revulsion. In Study 1 we introduce individual differences in intergroup disgust sensitivity (ITG-DS);

in Study 2 we examine effects of manipulated intergroup disgust on negative outgroup evaluations, and whether ITG-DS moderates its impact.

The disgust emotion

Among emotions, disgust is uniquely characterized by repulsion, heralding urgent withdrawal from psychologically offensive stimuli. Disgust is a basic and universal emotion (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000, 2009), linked to “primitive” brain regions signalling danger (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Thus, one central function involves protecting the self, especially the body, from invasive contaminants through the mouth (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2009; Rozin et al., 2009). Yet we use ingestion-relevant words in describing repulsive others as “unsavory” and intergroup contact with unsavory others as “unpalatable.” Such psychological reactions to outsiders may originate from basic gustatory systems protecting the corporeal body that have been co-opted and extended to guide our social systems (Rozin et al., 2000). Unlike simple distaste, however, disgust involves aversion to the nature of an offensive stimulus – what it is – and the ideation that

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its offensive properties can transfer (Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin et al., 2009). These concerns are often irrational, as with revulsion toward clothing worn by accident victims (Rozin, Markwith, & McCauley, 1994), reflecting a threat-sensitive defensive system that adaptively over-cludes potentially polluting stimuli as dangers (Schaller & Park, 2011). Not surprisingly, researchers are increasingly incorporating disgust into prejudice theories, theoretically associated with groups deemed low in competence and warmth (e.g., homeless; Harris & Fiske, 2006), or those violating ingroup norms (e.g., Smith, 1993). Our focus concerns theoretical approaches earmarking disgust as a central determinant in managing our social and intergroup relations.

Evolutionary approaches to disgust-prejudice relations

Humans have progressively adapted and passed on strategies for dealing with concrete problems associated with our complex social lives (see Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Disgust functionally protects us from others bearing marks of contamination and disease risk. Thus we not only avoid diseases but disease-carrying vessels (i.e., other people). The stakes can be high, with the transmission of foreign diseases being potentially devastating. Consider that, being more resistant to animal-borne diseases through animal-husbandry practices, Europeans virtually eradicated New World Aborigines by introducing novel pathogens (Diamond, 1997).

Although humans have evolved physiological immune responses to pathogens, these bear costs and side-effects, necessitating a concurrent behavioral immune system (Schaller & Park, 2011). This psychological defense distances us from others, particularly those bringing novel diseases that compromise locally attuned physiological immune systems. Aversion to contact with outsiders therefore functionally protects the ingroup. Like most evolved properties, however, aversion comes with social costs (e.g., lost innovation or trade). Correspondingly, individuals vary in perceived vulnerability to disease (Duncan, Schaller, & Park, 2009), such that those feeling vulnerable especially reject outsiders and diseased others (Schaller & Park, 2011). Such evolutionary approaches emphasize that disgust reactions concern primarily concrete contamination-based harm posed by outsiders through disease (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Oaten et al., 2009; Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009; Van Vugt & Park, 2009), where disgust reactions are activated toward disease-relevant targets and others presenting disgust-relevant cues.

Abstract-ideation and disgust

Taking a different approach, Rozin and colleagues (e.g., Rozin & Fallon, 1987; Rozin et al., 1994, 2000, 2009) first studied the psychological properties of disgust before inferring its social functions, reaching two important conclusions. First, the law of similarity proposes that if a stimulus appears disgusting, it is disgusting. For example, people are disgusted by consuming apple juice from new bed pans, or chocolate shaped as excrement. That is, superficial similarities imply deep and essential similarities (Rozin et al., 2000). This law concerns the properties of a stimulus and influences its perceived offensiveness. Second, the “magical” law of contagion underlies the belief that once stimuli have been in contact they are “always in contact” (Rozin et al., 2009). That is, properties of a substance can psychologically transfer even without physical transference. For example, people are repulsed by sterilized clothing worn by others experiencing misfortune or who are morally corrupt (Rozin et al., 1994). Whereas similarity psychologically affects what a target (or social group) is, contagion involves ideations that stimulus properties can spread to and alter the recipient, rendering it less pure. These properties of disgust hold promise for understanding outgroup prejudices, where humans are concerned not only with the divergent nature of the “other,” but that this deviance can influence and alter oneself (i.e., contaminate).

According to Rozin and colleagues, contamination concerns may have originally involved physical contaminants (e.g., disease), but advanced cognitive capacities brought abstract thinking that facilitates concerns over social contaminants (e.g., ideas, values). Here disgust serves a more abstract function than traditional evolutionary approaches endorse (Oaten et al., 2009; Tybur et al., 2009), with disgust protecting not only the body but the “soul,” in ways that promote feelings of ingroup purity and superiority (Rozin et al., 2009). Specifically, “disgust serves as an ethnic or outgroup marker” (Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, & Imada, 1997, p. 73) for “the purpose of maintaining social distinctiveness and social hierarchies” (Rozin et al., 2000, p. 643). From this perspective disgust is directly involved in symbolic ideations about purity and sacredness, often egocentrically epitomized by one's ingroup, that can shape social relations. These disgust-relevant reactions, we believe, are particularly relevant in explaining extreme intergroup behavior (e.g., genocide) but also more common forms of intergroup bias.

Consistent with this reasoning, Hodson and Costello (2007) revealed associations between heightened disgust sensitivity and social ideologies that entrench hierarchical social rankings and justify inequities (e.g., authoritarianism, social dominance orientation). Specifically, those more disgusted by others desire greater social order and social stratifications positioning some groups (typically “us”) above others (typically “them”). Conservatives are also more disgust-sensitive (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Olatunji, 2008; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010). Such links between disgust reactivity and ideological worldviews confirm that, in addition to handling concrete disease-protection concerns, disgust maps onto highly abstract mental representations and intergroup-relevant belief systems that manage intergroup relations.

Intergroup disgust

The evolutionary and abstract-ideational approaches to disgust each consider disgust a protective emotion that initiates withdrawal responses to avoid contamination. Drawing from these approaches, we develop the notion of intergroup disgust as an overlooked contributor to negative outgroup attitudes, both as individual difference and as an induced state. We also draw on theory concerning intergroup anxiety: Although people can experience generalized anxiety, intergroup anxiety (feeling awkward, embarrassed, and irritated around outgroups) especially predicts prejudice (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Analogously, relative to general disgust, intergroup disgust should be particularly relevant to outgroup attitudes. Finally, we recognize cognitive-appraisal approaches, whereby outgroups who engage in activities that are non-normative to one's ingroup (e.g., eating dogs; copulating with close relatives) can elicit disgust-reactions through norm-violation (Smith, 1993, 1999). Norm violations across group boundaries, particularly pertaining to sexual activities and food, can potentially lead to appraisals of an outgroup as relatively less human (see Haslam, 2006). Indeed, past research demonstrates positive associations between disgust and dehumanization (Hodson & Costello, 2007).

Intergroup disgust is characterized by reacting to an outgroup as repulsive. This can result from reactions to outgroup practices and/or beliefs, including (but not limited to) core disgust (e.g., ingesting their prepared foods), sex disgust (e.g., physical intimacy, exchanging bodily fluids), values (e.g., child-rearing) or disease-based contamination (e.g., they make us ill). Disgust-eliciting outgroups can also be psychologically threatening. Given the laws of similarity and contagion characterizing disgust (Rozin et al., 2000, 2009), groups associated with disgust-elicitors (e.g., disease, deviance, immorality) will be seen as disgusting and thus relevant targets for prejudice.

In summary, outgroups can be considered as psychological “pollutants”; we can be disgusted by dirty and unhealthy others and by those with different and potentially “corrupting” values violating ingroup norms (see Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Intergroup disgust conceptually involves: (a) negative affect, especially revulsion and disgust toward outgroups; (b) contamination concerns (i.e., outgroup is dangerous, can

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