Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 47 (2011) 1225–1230

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Reports

Gross gods and icky atheism: Disgust responses to rejected religious beliefs☆

Ryan S. Ritter *, Jesse Lee Preston

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 14 May 2011

Keywords:
Moral disgust
Taste
Religious belief
Embodiment
Outgroups

ABSTRACT

Disgust is an emotional response that helps to maintain and protect physical and spiritual purity by signaling contamination and motivating the restoration of personal cleanliness. In the present research we predicted that disgust may be elicited by contact with outgroup religious beliefs, as these beliefs pose a threat to spiritual purity. Two experiments tested this prediction using a repeated taste-test paradigm in which participants tasted and rated a drink before and after copying a passage from an outgroup religion. In Experiment 1, Christian participants showed increased disgust after writing a passage from the Qur'an or Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, but not a control text. Experiment 2 replicated this effect, and also showed that contact with an ingroup religious belief (Christians copying from the Bible) did not elicit disgust. Moreover, Experiment 2 showed that disgust to rejected beliefs was eliminated when participants were allowed to wash their hands after copying the passage, symbolically restoring spiritual cleanliness. Together, these results provide evidence that contact with rejected religious beliefs elicits disgust by symbolically violating spiritual purity. Implications for intergroup relations between religious groups is discussed, and the role of disgust in the protection of beliefs that hold moral value.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Disgust has been described as "the body and soul emotion" for its role in providing the affective input for the intuitions that inform us of *purity violations*: acts that defile the sanctity of the physical or spiritual self (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999). Although disgust originally evolved to motivate the avoidance of threats that could harm the physical body (e.g., toxins, disease), it has since extended to social contexts as well. That is, we can be disgusted by a rotting corpse as well as a "rotten" lie; an unclean bathroom and an "unclean" adulterer. Indeed, past research has borne out the hypothesis that purity violations are closely associated with the emotion of disgust (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). For example, people report feeling disgust in response to moral violations such as sexual taboos (Gutierrez & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Rozin, Lowery, et al., 1999). Likewise, fMRI research demonstrates that thinking about socio-moral violations (e.g., incest, killing your sister's child) activates areas of the brain associated with more primitive forms of disgust (Borg, Lieberman, & Kiehl, 2008). Feelings of disgust can also impact moral judgments, as researchers have found that inducing people to experience disgust leads them to make more harsh moral judgments (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008; Wheatley & Haidt, 2005), and increases the condemnation of purity violations (Horberg et al., 2009). Such evidence demonstrates the importance of disgust in our subjective experience of moral purity, and suggests that threats to one's sense of physical or spiritual purity are likely to elicit disgust.

The present research contributed to existing literature by examining the role of disgust in the context of rejected religious beliefs. Specifically, we predict that people may become literally disgusted by contact with an outgroup religion. Just as disgust can be elicited by the purity violations described above, contact with rejected religious beliefs may be perceived as a threat to one's spiritual self and so be rejected by the same intuitive emotional mechanism. There are several reasons to anticipate this finding. First, people often report disgust in response to outgroups that threaten their moral ideals (e.g., homosexuals; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Likewise, incidental feelings of disgust can exacerbate ethnocentrism and outgroup bias (Navarrete, Fessler, & Eng, 2007). Religions are not just belief systems, but also delineate important social categories, and therefore may similarly elicit disgust as a means of protection from threatening outgroups. Second, religious beliefs tend to have a strong moral component—that is, there are "right" and "wrong" beliefs to hold, and there is a perceived moral consequence for believing (e.g., eternal reward) or disbelieving (e.g., eternal torture) the prescribed truth. To the extent that a given thought or action has been moralized by one's religious tradition, we should expect its violation to be perceived as a threat to one's purity. This idea has been demonstrated, for example, by the finding that Protestants tend to moralize the contents of their thoughts more than Jews, and so find it more morally wrong to merely contemplate a sinful action (e.g., committing adultery) even without engaging in it (Cohen & Rozin, 2001). Likewise, merely considering taboo thoughts ("heretical

☆ We thank John Anderson, Evan Branson, Benjamin Chesher, Eli Kliejunas, Abigail Levin, Irene Oh and Pin-Ya Tseng for their assistance in data collection.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 E. Daniel St., Champaign, IL, 61820, USA. Fax: +1 217 244 5876.
E-mail address: ritter5@psych.illinois.edu (R.S. Ritter).

0022-1031/$ – see front matter © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2011.05.006

counterfactuals") tends to elicit moral outrage and an increased desire for moral reaffirmation (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000). Engaging in contact with rejected religious beliefs – a kind of culturally proscribed cognition – should thus be perceived as a threat to one's own sense of spiritual purity, and therefore elicit disgust.

Finally, religious belief is closely connected with the moral virtues of sanctity and purity, which are symbolically represented in many different religious practices (Graham & Haidt, 2010). Thus, not only are *beliefs* often moralized as described above, but religious *rituals* all throughout the world include prescribed acts of bodily cleansing intended to symbolically purify the spirit and prepare the believer for communion with God. Examples abound, including the Christian practice of baptism, the Islamic practice of ablution prior to prayer, or the Hindu practice of bathing in the sacred river Ganges. Many religions are also replete with strict rules governing sexual behavior (e.g., no premarital sex), clothing (e.g., sacred garments), and the appropriate preparation and/or consumption of food and alcohol. These ubiquitous concerns with spiritual *and* physical cleanliness again suggest that contact with "unclean" beliefs should elicit disgust, but further suggest that religious purity violations may literally leave people feeling physically dirty.

Related to these points, recent studies have in fact demonstrated the embodiment of moral purity in feelings of physical cleanliness, thus lending credence to the psychological utility of the kinds of purification rituals common in religious practice. Zhong and Liljenquist (2006), for example, have demonstrated that feelings of moral impurity (as induced by asking participants to imagine a past transgression) leave people feeling dirty and wanting to physically cleanse themselves. When given the opportunity to wash their hands, however, it had the effect of "washing away one's sins", making people less likely to engage in compensatory prosocial behavior (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). Physical cleansing can also alleviate incidental feelings of disgust (Schnall, Benton, & Harvey, 2008) or lead to a heightened sense of having a "clean self" (Zhong, Strejcek, & Sivanthan, 2010) and impact subsequent moral judgments. Moreover, researchers have also demonstrated that feelings of purity can be embodied in our olfactory sense; that clean smells can promote virtuous behavior (Liljenquist, Zhong, & Galinsky, 2010) and disgusting smells (e.g., from a commercial "fart spray") can render more harsh moral judgments (Schnall et al., 2008). It should not be surprising, then, that religions all throughout the world have been incorporating rituals involving cleaning and fragrance for thousands of years, as they literally help establish, restore, or maintain a sense of moral or spiritual purity.

Besides touch and smell, moral (im)purity may also be embodied in the sense of taste (for more on taste as a metaphor for morality, see Hume, 1998, p. 495; Haidt & Joseph, 2007). For example, Eskine, Kacinik, and Prinz (2011) found that participants who tasted an unpleasant beverage subsequently made more harsh moral judgments than participants who tasted water or a sweetened beverage. In other words, experiencing gustatory disgust increased moral condemnation. But we may also expect the direction of causality to be reversed—that moral impurities may *elicit* gustatory disgust. In fact, anecdotal support for this hypothesis can be found in some of our everyday language about moral events. We often speak of someone's immoral actions as being "tasteless" or as "leaving a bad taste in the mouth," for example, and we associate pleasant tastes with moral purity and divinity (e.g., "taste and see that the Lord is good" Psalms 34:8, NIV; "this cheesecake is divine!").

The present research

The present research addresses two related questions. First, does contact with rejected religious beliefs elicit disgust? Second, if contact with rejected beliefs elicits disgust, can acts of physical cleansing (e.g., hand washing) function to restore a sense of purity following contact? Two experiments addressed these questions using a novel repeated taste-test paradigm whereby ratings of disgust toward a beverage were taken before and after hand-copying a passage from a religious or control text. Experiment 1 investigated disgust responses after Christian participants copied a passage from the Qur'an, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*,[1] or a control text. Experiment 2 compared disgust before and after copying a rejected (i.e., Qur'an/Dawkins) vs. an accepted religious text (i.e., Bible). In both studies we predicted greater disgust after copying texts from rejected religious beliefs, but not neutral or accepted beliefs. That is, contact with outgroup religious beliefs may literally leave a bad taste in the mouth, causing a beverage to be perceived as more disgusting after contact.

Experiment 2 further explored the embodiment of disgust by introducing a hand-cleaning manipulation following contact. We predicted that physical cleansing would eliminate the gustatory disgust response by symbolically removing the moral impurity associated with the rejected belief.

Experiment 1

Participants in Experiment 1 tasted and rated a lemon drink before and after writing a passage from the Qur'an, *The God Delusion*, or a control text. We predicted that the second drink would be rated more disgusting than the first after contact with a rejected belief system (i.e., Islam and Atheism), whereas no differences between drink ratings were anticipated after contact with the control text.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Psychology Subject Pool at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was critical that participants reject the beliefs of the target religious texts, we therefore prescreened for Christian volunteers using a questionnaire administered to the Subject Pool. 88 self-reported Christian undergraduates participated for partial course credit. Six people were excluded for either failing to follow directions or guessing the hypothesis, leaving 82 participants (29 men, 53 women; mean age = 19) included in the analysis.

Repeated taste-test paradigm

To measure disgust responses we developed a novel repeated taste-test paradigm. Participants were told that they would complete two separate studies: a consumer marketing survey, and an investigation into the relation between handwriting and personality. As part of the consumer marketing study participants were asked to taste and rate two slightly different variations of a beverage (in reality, the two beverages were identical). The handwriting portion of the study was framed as an unrelated task administered between tasting the two beverages, ostensibly so the participants would have time to refresh their palate. During this task, participants copied the target religious/control text. This cover story allowed us to measure participants' disgust rating of a lemon-water solution on two separate occasions: immediately before and after copying a rejected or neutral passage, and so provides a simple way of measuring change in feelings of disgust while controlling for baseline responses to the beverage. Further, rather than relying on explicit questions (e.g., "how disgusted were you by the passage?") that tend to be more susceptible to response biases and demand characteristics, this paradigm provides a more indirect measure of people's intuitive responses by asking participants to rate a beverage during a seemingly unrelated task.

[1] Although Atheism is not a religion, but the absence of religion, we refer to it as a "rejected religious belief" throughout the paper because the denial of belief is antithetical to subjects' religious beliefs.

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/947991

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/947991

Daneshyari.com