



## Brief Report

## Disgust, scrupulosity and conservative attitudes about sex: Evidence for a mediational model of homophobia

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## ABSTRACT

In the present study, core disgust predicted negative attitudes toward homosexuals even after controlling for contamination fear. The effect of core disgust on negative attitudes toward homosexuals was indirect, partially mediated by conservative sexual attitudes and religiosity. The effects of religious principles on negative attitudes toward homosexuals were indirect, via conservative sexual beliefs. These results establish a link between disgust and negative attitudes towards homosexuals that is not fully accounted for by contamination concerns, but rather is partially accounted for by conservative sexual ideology and religiosity.

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## 1. Introduction

The available research suggests that disgust may be implicated in antigay attitudes (Neisen, 1990). The function of disgust ranges from protecting the body from offensive objects (core), to distancing oneself from reminders of one's animal nature (animal-reminder), to concerns with protecting the body/soul from contagion (contamination; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Over time disgust has evolved from a food-based system to a culturally adapted broad-based emotion that motivates rejection of out-groups (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). In line with this notion, a recent study found that disgust predicted negative attitudes toward immigrants and foreigners (Hodson & Costello, 2007) suggesting that disgust may be socially engineered in a similar fashion to marginalize homosexuals from the normative group. Indeed, when people are asked about things that disgust them, references to gay sexual activity are frequently found (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997).

Several domains of disgust may relate to negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Core disgust may predict negative attitudes towards homosexuals because it pertains directly to bodily products (e.g., semen) which are commonly associated with gay sexual activity. Animal-reminder disgust may also be a predictor of negative attitudes towards homosexuals as it encourages boundaries between humans and animals. Animal-reminder disgust also involves a forcible breach of the exterior envelope of the human body (Haidt et al., 1997) which is often associated with gay male sexual activity (e.g., anal sex). In fact, unusual sexual practices have been identified as a strong elicitor of animal-reminder disgust (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994).

Contamination disgust consists of concerns about diseases and prior research has shown that people exhibit revulsion toward contact with those with diseases commonly associated with homosexuals (HIV; Rozin, Markwith, & McCauley, 1994). Although disgust appraisals may be more easily associated with gay male sexual activity, consideration of gay female sexual activity as 'unnatural' may also motivate disgust appraisals.

Disgust is generally associated with physical and psychological distancing of oneself from stimuli that are rendered offensive (Rozin et al., 2000) and such behavior is commonly observed in relation to homosexuals (i.e., rejecting same sex marriages). Avoidance of extreme outgroups may be partially due to concerns with contracting diseases and there is an increase rate of sexually transmitted diseases among gay men (Fenton & Imrie, 2005). In fact, it has been noted that "homophobic

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disgust" may involve concerns about bodily products, such as semen, and their potential for disease consequence (Nussbaum, 1999). Although disgust may contribute to negative attitudes towards homosexuals, the mechanisms through which this occurs remain unclear. Hodson and Costello (2007) recently found that the effect of interpersonal disgust on group attitudes was mediated by social-dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and dehumanizing perceptions of the out-group. This finding suggests that a link between disgust and negative attitudes towards homosexuals may be explained by specific ideological orientations.

Sexual practices have traditionally been a source of division among conservatives and liberals. Conservative views about sex may be characterized by preservation of the status quo (i.e., sex should be between a man and a woman). Furthermore, Haidt and Hersh (2001) found that compared to liberals, conservatives were more likely to moralize and condemn gay sexual activity. Disgust may promote conservative attitudes about sex thus discouraging contact with those who engage in sexual practices that have been condemned for being outside the norm. Disgust has also been linked to notions of purity which are incorporated into the moral codes of various religions where they function as protectors of the soul from moral pollution (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Recent research suggests that conservative attitudes associated with religious ideology may also contribute to homophobia (Rosik, Griffith, & Cruz, 2007) as religiosity significantly correlates with less endorsement of human rights for gays and greater homophobia (Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997). Disgust properties may be socially transmitted via conservative and religious principles to drive the notion that homosexuality is sinful and impure.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the mechanisms through which disgust operates on negative attitudes towards homosexuals. It was predicted that core, animal-reminder, and contamination disgust would uniquely predict negative attitudes toward homosexuals. It remains unknown whether disgust and contamination fear are relevant to predicting attitudes toward homosexuals. Disease concerns are related to disgust (Olatunji & Sawchuk, 2005). However, disgust also serves a higher order purpose of guarding the soul which makes it distinct from contamination concerns (Rozin et al., 2000). It was predicted that as a general defense emotion not directly linked to intergroup relations, disgust would predict negative attitudes towards homosexuals indirectly. It was predicted that disgust would directly predict increases in conservative sexual beliefs because of its revulsion properties. It was also predicted that disgust would directly predict religiosity because of its purity-enhancing properties. Conservative sexual beliefs were expected to exert a direct effect on negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Lastly, it was predicted that the influence of religious principles on negative attitudes towards homosexuals would be channeled through conservative sexual attitudes.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 100 undergraduate students (57 = Female; Mean age = 22.6,  $SD = 4.94$ ) who received research credit in exchange for their participation.

### 2.2. Measures

The *Disgust Scale-Revised* (DS-R; modified by Olatunji et al., 2007) is a 25-item measure of sensitivity to core, animal-reminder, and contamination disgust.

The *Penn Inventory of Scrupulosity* (PIOS; modified by Olatunji, Abramowitz, Williams, Connolly, & Lohr, 2007) fear of sin subscale consists of 10-items assessing fears about having committed sin.

The *Index of Attitudes towards Homosexuals* (IAH; Hudson, 1997; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) is a 25-item measure of reactions to being in close quarters with homosexuals.

The *Sexual Attitudes Scale* (SAS; Hudson, 1997) is a 25-item measure of liberal versus conservative sexual attitudes.

The *Padua Inventory* (PI; Burns, Keortge, Formea, & Sternberger, 1996) contamination fear subscale consists of 10 items assessing contamination concerns.

The *Balanced Inventory for Desirable Responding* (PDS; Paulhus, 1998) is a 40-item measure of social desirability that consists of two 20 item scales: Impression Management (IM) and Self Deceptive Enhancement (SDE).

### 2.3. Procedure

Packets of the materials were distributed to participants in small groups and brief instructions were given on how to complete the materials.

## 3. Results

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for all measures. Increased overall disgust sensitivity (DS-R total score;  $M = 12.40$ ;  $SD = 4.93$ ) significantly predicted homophobic tendencies, as assessed by the IAH ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and conservative attitudes towards sex, assessed with the SAS ( $r = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Disgust sensitivity was also related to the fear of sin ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as assessed by the PIOS. Disgust sensitivity was unrelated to impression management ( $r = -.06$ ,  $p = .562$ ), but was related to self-deception enhancement ( $r = -.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) suggesting

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