Moral Concerns About Purity may be Driven by Sexual Disgust Rather than Pathogen Disgust

Florian van Leeuwen, Justin H. Park

1. Introduction

Emotions influence moral judgements (Haidt, 2001), and disgust is a key emotion underpinning judgements of wrongness. Disgust amplifies perceptions of wrongness (Schnall et al., 2008) and plays a role in transforming non-moral issues into moral ones (Rozin, 1999).

The link between disgust and moral judgement is not general. This is because morals are not monolithic but consist of distinct moral domains, as articulated in moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2009). While there are morals deemed important by most people (e.g., justice and care), there are also morals whose perceived importance varies substantially across people (e.g., group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity). The latter are associated with political conservatism.

If morals exist to regulate behaviours, endorsement of specific morals may be associated with the perceived importance of regulating specific behaviours, which in turn may be associated with perceptions of specific threats. For instance, individuals who perceive more dangers in the world may assuage this threat in part by strengthening their endorsement of morals pertaining to group loyalty, respect, and purity (Van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). Likewise, disgust, which purportedly serves to protect the body from contaminants, appears to amplify the moralisation of purity (Horberg et al., 2009). Other research suggests that the morals of loyalty, respect, and purity are more strongly tied to ecological threats than are the morals of justice and care (Van Leeuwen et al., 2012). This investigation focuses on the morals of loyalty, respect, and purity.

Just as there are distinct moral domains, there are distinct domains of disgust, pertaining to pathogen avoidance, mate choice, and social interaction (Tybur et al., 2009). What are the relations between the disgust domains and the moral domains? The predictions (and counter-predictions) are as follows:

a. One obvious link involves the disgust associated with social interaction (i.e., moral disgust); moral disgust is expected to be associated with endorsement of moral domains in general.

b. To the extent that loyalty, respect, and purity serve the function of protecting the ingroup from disease threats (Van Leeuwen et al., 2012), pathogen disgust may be associated with endorsement of all of these moral domains.

c. To the extent that purity in particular serves as a buffer against contaminants (Haidt & Graham, 2007), pathogen disgust may be especially strongly associated with purity.

d. To the extent that purity is actually more closely associated with sexuality (i.e., low promiscuity), attitudes toward sexuality (measured here as sexual disgust) may be especially strongly associated with purity (Kurzban et al., 2010).

2. Method

273 students (158 women, 115 men; mean age = 20.5 years, SD = 3.97) from a UK university completed the Three-Domain Disgust Scale (Tybur et al., 2009) and the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2011). Their political identity (1 = very liberal, 7 = very conservative) served as another predictor.

3. Results

All three disgust domains were positively correlated with all three moral domains (r = .14-.42). Political identity was positively correlated with all three moral domains (r = .34-.36), and with pathogen disgust (r = .13, p = .03) and sexual disgust (r = .22, p < .001).

To assess the independent predictive effects of the disgust domains (while controlling for political identity) on each of the moral domains, three regression analyses examined the predictive effects of the three domains of disgust and political identity on the morals of loyalty, respect, and purity (see Table 1).

4. Conclusion

The results support the perspective that moral condemnation is driven/amplified by the experience of disgust. Also, the association between pathogen disgust and loyalty suggests that disease concerns may have a specific effect on morals relevant to group cohesion (cf. Fincher et al., 2008; Van Leeuwen et al., 2012). Finally, the contrasting findings for pathogen disgust and sexual disgust suggest two possibilities:

1. The MFQ purity/sanctity subscale taps into moral values relevant to sexual behaviour but not to disease avoidance;
2. Moral concerns about bodily/spiritual purity are more closely linked to sexual concerns than to disease concerns.

More generally, disgust sensitivity appears to be a reliable predictor of moral values, over and above political ideology.

References


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Table 1. Results of regression analyses in which endorsement of moral domains of loyalty, respect, and purity were predicted from political identity, moral disgust, pathogen disgust, and sexual disgust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Political identity</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral disgust</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pathogen disgust</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual disgust</td>
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<td>.554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Political identity</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral disgust</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pathogen disgust</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual disgust</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.488</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>Political identity</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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<td>Moral disgust</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual disgust</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
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Note: β = standardised regression coefficient. Significant predictors in bold.