

Gut Check: Reappraisal of Disgust Helps Explain Liberal–Conservative Differences on Issues of Purity

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Disgust plays an important role in conservatives' moral and political judgments, helping to explain why conservatives and liberals differ in their attitudes on issues related to purity. We examined the extent to which the emotion-regulation strategy reappraisal drives the disgust–conservatism relationship. We hypothesized that disgust has less influence on the political and moral judgments of liberals because they tend to regulate disgust reactions through emotional reappraisal more than conservatives. Study 1a found that a greater tendency to reappraise disgust was negatively associated with conservatism, independent of disgust sensitivity. Study 1b replicated this finding, demonstrating that the effect of reappraisal is unique to disgust. In Study 2, liberals condemned a disgusting act less than conservatives, and did so to the extent that they reappraised their initial disgust response. Study 3 manipulated participants' use of reappraisal when exposed to a video of men kissing. Conservatives instructed to reappraise their emotional reactions subsequently expressed more support for same-sex marriage than conservatives in the control condition, demonstrating attitudes statistically equivalent to liberal participants.

Keywords: disgust, emotion regulation, morality, political attitudes, conservatism

Why do liberals and conservatives differ so greatly on highly contested social issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion? Recent research suggests that the emotion of disgust plays a significant role in explaining political polarization on such purity-related issues. Both Trait levels of disgust sensitivity and induced experience of disgust predict more conservative stances on such issues (Helzer & Pizzaro, 2011; Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009, 2012; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009). Here, we build on this past research on the role of disgust in moral and political judgments, specifically exploring how differences between liberals and conservatives in the regulation of disgust help explain their divergent attitudes on purity-related issues.

The Moral Functions of Disgust

Theorists have argued that, in the course of evolution, disgust reactions were selected for because they guided humans to avoid ingesting potentially dangerous substances (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). However, many have postulated that disgust has also come to be linked with moral judgment, leading individuals to avoid others who might be immoral, and therefore potentially physically and socially dangerous (Schaller & Duncan, 2007). Recent research supports this view of disgust as a fundamental moral emotion. When a stimulus evokes disgust, individuals are much more likely to condemn acts or individuals associated with the stimulus (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; Haidt, Rozin, McCauley, & Imada, 1997). In many cases, participants are unable to verbalize an explanation for their judgment, except to simply say that the act was disgusting—a phenomenon referred to as “moral dumbfounding” (Haidt, 2001). Moreover, research finds that inducing disgust can influence moral judgments. For example, study participants exposed to a disgusting stimulus, such as a foul smell or taste, became harsher judges of impure or morally questionable behavior than individuals not exposed to the disgust elicitor (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2011; Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008). In other research, participants who received hypnotic suggestions to experience disgust when exposed to neutral words while reading about a target judged the target's behavior as more inap-

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