



## Disgust: A predictor of social conservatism and prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals

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### ABSTRACT

Disgust is a universal human emotion that evolved to protect individuals from ingesting harmful substances such as toxins and pathogens. Recent research suggests that disgust is a component of a “behavioral immune system” that encourages individuals to avoid people and situations that could potentially result in bodily contamination. The purpose of the current research was to explore the role of social conservatism in the link between disgust and prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals. The results of a correlational study (Study 1) indicated that disgust sensitivity was positively correlated with socially conservative values. However, the relation was specific to conservative values regarding intergroup relations and potential contamination. In Study 2, disgust was experimentally manipulated. Inducing disgust resulted in increased prejudicial attitudes toward contact with homosexuals for conservative individuals and reduced prejudice for liberals. The results of these studies support the claim that disgust is part of a “behavioral immune system” that promotes socially conservative value systems and can lead to increased negative attitudes toward outgroups.

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### 1. Introduction

Disgust is a cross-culturally recognized emotion that invokes feelings of nausea and revulsion when individuals are exposed to repulsive stimuli (Ekman, 1970). In his book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin (1872) referred to disgust as “something revolting, primarily in relation to the sense of taste, as actually perceived or vividly imagined” (p. 253). Essentially, disgust is thought to have evolved to protect individuals from ingesting harmful substances such as toxins and pathogens by inducing nausea and gag reflexes. However, the emotion of disgust may not be limited to oral contamination. Recent research suggests that disgust may also influence social behavior.

Schaller (2006) has suggested that disgust is a component of the “behavioral immune system” which motivates individuals to avoid situations that may lead to contamination. That is, disgust may be an “evolved disease avoidance mechanism” (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan, 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). According to this perspective, disgust serves a protective function by indicating that a specific situation, object, or person may be infectious or toxic and contact may result in bodily contamination. Thus, the experience of disgust signals avoidance of the target. Importantly, the disgust evoking stimulus is not limited

to inanimate objects (e.g., food) or the sense of taste or smell. Rather, disgust may be induced through a number of different routes, such as visual appearance, and associated with people or situations. Consequently, disgust may lead to social behaviors such as social exclusion and outgroup avoidance. Along these lines, a number of recent studies have examined the relation between disgust and outgroup prejudice in the context of disease avoidance (e.g., Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006; Park, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2003).

According to Schaller and Duncan (2007), the behavioral immune system should encourage individuals to prefer ingroup members over outgroup members. Ingroup members are more likely to have been exposed to the same diseases or pathogens and, therefore, have many of the same antibodies and immunity. Also, they share norms and customs, which may help limit transmission of disease. Outgroup members pose the threat of exposing individuals to foreign diseases or contamination. As a result, individuals are more vulnerable to the diseases of outgroup members and should have a stronger disgust reaction to outgroup members. Therefore, individuals with a strong behavioral immune system should exhibit more positive attitudes toward ingroup members and more negative attitudes toward outgroup members.

In support of the disease avoidance model, researchers have demonstrated that perceived vulnerability to disease is related to negative attitudes toward outgroups, such as the disabled or foreigners (Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006;

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Park et al., 2003). Disgust sensitivity has also been found to positively correlate with prejudice toward homosexuals (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Olatunji, 2008). Moreover, manipulating disease salience has been demonstrated to increase negative attitudes toward outgroups and increase positive attitudes toward the ingroup (Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). Specifically, in a Canadian sample, Faulkner and colleagues (2004) manipulated disease salience and had participants make judgments about either Nigerian or Scottish immigrants. They found that inducing disease salience resulted in more positive attitudes toward the immigration of familiar others (e.g., Scots) but negative attitudes toward immigration of foreign others (e.g., Nigerians). Similarly, in an American sample, Navarrete and Fessler (2006) manipulated disgust and had participants rate ingroup and outgroup members. They found that inducing disgust resulted in more attraction to ingroup members (e.g., Americans) but a nonsignificant negativity toward outgroup members (e.g., foreigners). However, disgust sensitivity was associated with higher levels of negativity toward outgroups. These results suggest that the activation of the behavioral immune system encourages individuals to exhibit positivity toward ingroup members and negativity toward outgroup members.

From this work, it is apparent that the strength of the behavioral immune system varies on an individual basis and can be measured as a chronic personality trait with indices of disgust sensitivity and disease vulnerability. However, the behavioral immune system may have broader, more socially relevant correlates. That is, the behavioral immune system may relate to social value systems, which promote the inclusion or exclusion of others and set norms regarding intergroup relations. Given that the behavioral immune system functions as a mechanism that promotes avoidance of outgroup members, individuals with strong behavioral immune systems should be more likely to endorse socially conservative belief systems, such as authoritarianism, political conservatism, and religious fundamentalism, which encourage prejudice toward outgroups and fear of contamination (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Duckitt, 2006; Sears & Henry, 2003). These value systems may serve to maintain and strengthen the behavioral immune system.

There is some evidence to demonstrate an association between social conservatism and the behavioral immune system. Disgust sensitivity and disease prevalence have been related to openness to experience and sociosexuality (Druschel & Sherman, 1999; Schaller & Murray, 2008). Disgust sensitivity has also been related to political conservatism (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009) and religious obsessions (Olatunji, Tolin, Huppert, & Lohr, 2005). If the behavioral immune system protects against possible contamination from outgroup members, strong behavioral immune systems should be related to a broad range of conservative value systems which encourage prejudice toward outgroups and fear of contamination.

The purpose of the current research was to examine the relation between the behavioral immune system, as indexed by disgust sensitivity, and socially conservative value systems in the context of intergroup relations. The first study was intended to demonstrate the basic associations among disgust sensitivity, conservative beliefs, and prejudice toward homosexuals. Of particular interest was the extent to which disgust sensitivity related to socially conservative beliefs, beyond political conservatism. If disgust functions as a disease avoidance mechanism, it should only be related to socially conservative attitudes that emphasize the avoidance of situations and outgroup members that could lead to bodily contamination. Thus, the first study investigated whether disgust sensitivity is related to right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. Both of these measures have received little or no examination, respectively, with regard to their associa-

tion with disgust sensitivity. Also, we examined whether the relation between disgust sensitivity and political conservatism is specific to political issues related to contamination. The first study was intended to provide evidence that the behavioral immune system is related to a broad range of socially conservative value systems.

In the second study, the role of social conservatism in the association between disgust and prejudice toward homosexual individuals was experimentally tested. The primary purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether inducing disgust would result in increased prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals and whether the effect of disgust would be moderated by endorsement of conservative beliefs. As research has suggested that conservatives are more sensitive to disgust (Inbar et al., 2009) and perceive homosexuals as outgroup members, it was hypothesized that social conservatives would exhibit increased prejudice toward homosexuals, whereas less conservative individuals would exhibit decreased prejudice because they are more likely to include homosexuals in their ingroup.

## 2. Study 1

The purpose of the first study was to investigate the relation between the behavioral immune system and social conservatism. As disgust is hypothesized to function as a disease avoidance mechanism that promotes negative attitudes toward outgroup members (Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006), it should be related to conservative belief systems that promote avoidance of outgroup members and fear of contamination. In particular, the study was designed to strengthen the argument for the relation between disease avoidance and conservatism by linking disgust sensitivity to a broad range of socially conservative value systems. Specifically, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), religious fundamentalism, and conservative political opinions were chosen because of their relation to outgroup prejudice and fear of contamination.

RWA is a combination of submission to authority, aggression toward outgroups, and conventionalism, and it is strongly related to prejudice toward African Americans (Altemeyer, 1988) and homosexuals (Laythe, Finkel, & Kirkpatrick, 2001). With regard to religious conservatism, some of the core beliefs of Christianity involve purity, and many Christians engage in rituals such as baptisms and absolution to cleanse the body of sin and moral contamination. Also, religious fundamentalism has been found to correlate with prejudice toward homosexuals (Laythe et al., 2001). Thus, a religious fundamentalism scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), which measures Christian orthodoxy and dogmatism, was incorporated. Consequently, it was expected that authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism would be positively associated with disgust sensitivity. With regard to political conservatism, some policies are relevant to intergroup relations and potential contamination (e.g., immigration, same sex marriage), whereas others are not relevant (e.g., minimum wage, separation of church and state). As the behavioral immune system encourages the avoidance of social situations that could potentially lead to contamination, it was expected that disgust sensitivity would only be associated with political policies regarding outgroups and contamination.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

One-hundred forty-six introductory psychology students (68% female; mean age = 18.84, *SD* = 2.46) from the College of William and Mary participated in the study for course credit.

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