



Self-affirming trait kindness regulates disgust toward one's physical appearance[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In two studies, self-affirming the behavioral trait of kindness was examined as a method of regulating state disgust toward one's physical appearance. In Study 1, 56 participants (37 women, 19 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.16$ years) completed either a questionnaire designed to self-affirm kindness or a control equivalent and rated their disgust, anger, sadness, and happiness toward their appearance and behavior. In Study 2, 116 individuals (83 women, 33 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 24.90$ years) participated in the same experiment over the internet in an ecologically valid context. When controlling for trait self-disgust, the self-affirmed in Study 1 reported significantly less disgust toward their appearance ($\eta_p^2 = .12, p = .011$). This effect was replicated in Study 2, but driven by lower state disgust levels in those higher in trait self-disgust ($f^2 = .10, p = .001$). Affirming valued traits, like kindness, may be a useful tool for regulating disgust toward body image.

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Introduction

Disgust is a universal basic emotion with a multiplicity of triggers. The “yuck” reaction is elicited by stimuli as diverse as dirt and deformity, parasites and pedophiles. While the origins of revulsion lie in the prevention of infectious disease (Curtis, Aunger, & Rabie, 2004), this pre-adapted aversion response is theorized to have acquired broader functionality through the documented process of evolutionary exaptation (Chapman & Anderson, 2012). Hence, contemporary repugnance can be seen as a normative reaction to diverse (socioculturally defined) stimuli, including unattractive bodily features, atypical sexual acts, and certain immoral behaviors, leading to its metaphorical description as the emotion of body and soul (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1999).

Both biological and cultural processes have contributed to the expansion in stimuli that evoke disgust (Rozin & Haidt, 2013). While some researchers disagree over the theoretical classifications used (e.g., Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli, 2013), the most influential model of disgust to date is that of Rozin, Haidt, et al. (1999). Rozin and colleagues (1999) traced disgust's evolution

through four qualitatively distinct stages, in response to emerging threats to the human body and mind. Disgust elicitors are proposed to have expanded from a “core” set with an oral incorporation focus (e.g., animals, rotten foods), to include reminders of our “animal nature” (e.g., body envelope violations, death), “interpersonal” threats (e.g., strangers, undesirable conspecifics), and “moral” elicitors that defile purity and sanctity (e.g., drug use, incest; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999).

Though the stimuli that induce disgust have increased, the characteristic features of the emotion (i.e., behavioral rejection, discrete facial expression, parasympathetic response, associated cognitions, and feelings of revulsion/nausea) have remained largely the same (e.g., Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009). Disgust is linked to magical thinking (Rozin & Fallon, 1987); innocuous objects that bear some similarity to, or have been in contact with, established disgust elicitors may elicit comparable responses (e.g., acne resembling infectious disease; Oaten, Stevenson, & Case, 2011). Furthermore, disgust is molded socioculturally and cultural variations exist at all levels (e.g., the Swedish delicacy of Surströmming, or fermented Baltic Sea herring, which is repulsive to most other cultures), but are greatest in the interpersonal and sociomoral disgusts (Rozin, Haidt et al., 1999).

Disgust and the Body

As an emotion that evolved to guard the body border (Rozin, Haidt et al., 1999), disgust has a particularly intimate relationship

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with body image. It has been linked to body dissatisfaction, criticism, and stigma (e.g., Griffiths & Page, 2008; Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007), and the violation of particular sociocultural bodily ideals (e.g., female menstruation; Fahs, 2014; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Disgust is also related to physical and mental health conditions that involve distortions of the body, such as cancer (Smith, Loewenstein, Rozin, Sheriff, & Ubel, 2007), eating disorders (Troop & Baker, 2009), and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD; Onden-Lim, Wu, & Grisham, 2012).

In a number of papers disgust has been linked to obesity stigma. Vartanian (2010) found disgust reactions to be a stronger predictor of weight bias than attributions of control or demographic characteristics (e.g., body mass index). In addition, obese people were rated as more disgusting than 11 other marginalized groups, including the homeless, homosexuals, and African Americans (but not politicians or drug addicts). O'Brien et al. (2013) explored the tripartite associations between appearance concerns, disgust, and anti-fat prejudice in a large Icelandic student sample. The researchers reported significant univariate and multivariate associations between these constructs. Disgust toward overweight body types may be driven by evolutionary fitness concerns (Park et al., 2007) and breaches of morality (O'Brien et al., 2013), given that obesity is moralized in the West (see Lieberman, Tybur, & Latner, 2012).

The links between disgust and physicality are not confined to weight, but extend to other body features as well. Propensities for "pathogen" (i.e., core) disgust have been shown to predict (physical) mate preferences. Heterosexual women higher in pathogen disgust prefer increased masculinity (Jones, Feinberg, et al., 2013), while heterosexual men prefer more facial femininity (Jones, Fincher, et al., 2013). Park, van Leeuwen, and Stephen (2012) examined the link between pathogen disgust and attractiveness ratings of mixed-sex faces in students. Park et al. (2012) found that sensitivity to pathogen disgust was negatively correlated with attractiveness ratings for unattractive faces, but not attractive faces (as determined by upper and lower quartiles in attractiveness ratings). Thus, it appears disgust is related to (un)attractiveness judgments in general, not solely those regarding weight.

Physical atypicality is also a major trigger of disgust (e.g., Smith et al., 2007). Examining disgust ratings of photos showing varying degrees of physical disfigurement, Shanmugarajah, Gaiind, Clarke, and Butler (2012) found that those higher in trait disgust sensitivity reported greater disgust toward all images. Moreover, this pattern held across "core," "animal-reminder," and "contamination" disgust sensitivities, suggesting multiple influences. Kleyn et al. (2009) recorded a diminished neural response to disgusted faces, compared to healthy controls, in a small group of men with psoriasis. This was interpreted as evidence of an acquired coping response to others' revulsion. Disgust, then, is elicited by physical bodies that appear to violate a range of sociocultural and evolutionary fitness ideals.

Self-Directed Disgust

Disgust elicitors are often contextualized as external to the agent, yet the self (and its attributes) can function as its own disgust object (Overton, Markland, Taggart, Bagshaw, & Simpson, 2008; Powell, Simpson, & Overton, in press; Power & Dalglish, 2008). Indeed, individuals may experience disgust toward their bodies, psychological characteristics, and behaviors (Powell, Overton, & Simpson, 2014). O'Brien et al. (2013) observed significant associations between disgust sensitivity and concerns with one's physical appearance. Fahs (2014) explored women's narratives about their vaginas, reporting a theme of disgust, or "dirty or gross." Physical self-disgust has also been recorded in experiments, for example in women asked to try on swimwear (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll,

Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). Further, heightened self-disgust features in mental health problems that involve issues with the body and/or bodily awareness, such as eating disorders (e.g., Espeset, Gulliksen, Nordbø, Skårderud, & Holte, 2012), BDD (e.g., Onden-Lim et al., 2012), sexual trauma (e.g., Jung & Steil, 2012), and certain cases of depression (e.g., Castle & Phillips, 2002).

Powell, Simpson, et al. (in press) sketched a model of dysfunctional self-disgust as an "emotion schema" (Izard, 2007), or a lasting, disgust-based cognitive-affective orientation to (some enduring and important feature of) the self. While the affective part of the schema is theorized as qualitatively similar to the emotional experience of disgust, the cognitive and higher-order content involves a lasting appraisal of (some feature of) the self as repulsive (i.e., "my body is revolting"). In this model, state and trait constructs are theorized to interact reciprocally, with state disgust contributing to elaborated cognitive content, which facilitates a lasting appraisal of (some aspect of) the self as a disgust object. Trait self-disgust, through its top-down influence on information processing, in turn facilitates more frequent state self-disgust reactions (i.e., to a range of triggers perceived as fitting with the self as disgusting).

While disgust toward one's body is likely to be concomitant with other complex, self-directed affective phenomena such as shame (Power & Dalglish, 2008), it can be theoretically distinguished by its particular cognitive-affective content (see Powell, Simpson, et al., in press). Unique features such as phenomenological revulsion, a discrete physiological and expressive profile, link to contamination and magical thinking, and specific cognitions (e.g., "yuck, that is revolting") suggest an emotional experience of disgust rather than something like shame (which is related to hierarchical submission and diminished social rank; Gilbert, 2007). It is possible for individuals to be self-critical and/or shameful about their bodies (e.g., when of smaller stature) without finding it disgusting, yet these phenomena can be often linked (Powell et al., 2014).

Given that heightened disgust toward one's body is negatively associated with psychological well-being (Powell, Simpson, et al., in press), it is surprising that little research has looked at techniques that may attenuate self-disgust. This is a notable oversight, as recent longitudinal work suggests trait self-disgust (especially toward physical appearance) may act as a vulnerability factor for later depression (Powell, Simpson, & Overton, 2013). Thus, it is of empirical and clinical interest whether feelings of physical self-disgust can be reduced. The limited work to date has been restricted to simple exposure techniques, such as mirror-exposure in BDD (Neziroglu, Hickey, & McKay, 2010). However, it is plausible that other psychological methods may be effective. One possibility is self-affirmation (Steele, 1988).

Self-Affirmation

The act of self-affirmation is hypothesized to protect against, or offset, specific threats to one's global self-worth and self-integrity through the assertion of an alternative valued characteristic (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988). Central to this theory is the idea of a multifaceted self-concept, with manifold divisible aspects of the self contributing to one's overall self-worth and integrity. Affirming an unrelated, but important, self-aspect is theorized to compensate for, and thus attenuate, a threat to self-worth in another domain (Steele, 1988). For instance, threats to physical appearance may be offset, or buffered, by affirming one's academic capabilities (e.g., Bergstrom, Neighbors, & Malheim, 2009).

Self-affirmation manipulations have been shown to have a range of beneficial effects (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For instance, self-affirming consistently reduces defensive biases and increases openness to uncongenial information (e.g., Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Reed & Aspinwall, 1998;

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