



Does injustice affect your sense of taste and smell? The mediating role of moral disgust



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Violations of interpersonal justice trigger a heightened sense of taste and smell.
- Disgust mediates the relationship between injustice and sensory perception.
- These effects occur over and above feelings of anger.

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ABSTRACT

Unfair treatment can activate strong negative emotions among victims and third parties. Less is known about other innate and evolutionary-based reactions to unfairness, such as those that manifest themselves through our senses. In three experiments, we found that interpersonally unfair treatment at work, defined as treatment that violates an individual's sense of dignity and respect, triggered disgust emotions over and above anger which subsequently related to stronger taste and smell reactions to gustatory and olfactory stimuli. This effect was observed for pleasant and unpleasant tasting products, for agreeable and malodorous scents, and among both mistreatment victims and third parties. Our findings suggest that violations of dignity and respect can trigger an evolutionary based reaction that activates a human alarm system, warning individuals of impending threats even when no oral threat is imminent.

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Does interpersonal injustice affect your taste and smell perceptions?

The mediating role of moral disgust

Considerable research has emphasized the role of conscious reasoning as a determinant of people's reactions to (un)fairness (e.g., equity theory, Adams, 1965). Evidence also shows, however, that unfair treatment can also produce involuntary justice reactions that arise with little conscious deliberation (e.g., Miller, 1997; Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010; Usoof-Thowfeek, Janoff-Bulman, & Tavernini, 2011). Folger (2001) theorized that these reactions involve evolutionary-based emotions such as anger and disgust that occur not only among victims of mistreatment, but also among third parties who are not directly affected by the mistreatment (see also Henrich, 2006; Henrich et al., 2006).

Several studies have examined emotional responses to workplace unfairness (e.g., Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005; Bies, 1987; De Cremer,

2007; see Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2010 for a review), but the emotion of disgust is relatively under-researched. This oversight is important given evidence that people report experiencing disgust in response to workplace injustice (Tripp & Bies, 2010). Most researchers who study disgust, however, have argued that unfair treatment should trigger anger, but not disgust because the latter emotion is triggered only by violations of physical, moral, or spiritual purity (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009; Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Although empirical research has generally supported this claim (Haidt & Hersh, 2001; Rozin et al., 1999; Vasquez, Keltner, Ebenbach, & Banaszynski, 2001), the findings are equivocal because some studies also show that unfairness can indeed trigger disgust (e.g., Cannon, Schnall, & White, 2011; Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009).

In the present paper we explore whether fairness violations can indeed trigger disgust. By doing so we contribute to the emerging literature on non-conscious responses to unfairness. Specifically, we examine whether being the direct recipient of unfair treatment or simply seeing others being treated unfairly, triggers disgust over and above anger. We then investigate whether experiencing disgust is associated with a heightened sensitivity to taste and smell. We test these involuntary reactions in the context of workplace violations of what organizational researchers refer to as *interpersonal justice*.

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Interpersonal justice is defined as the extent to which a person is treated by another person in a social interaction in ways that show a lack of politeness, dignity and respect independent of the outcomes allocated and the decision procedures followed in the interaction (Greenberg, 1993). Examples of interpersonal injustice include a supervisor publicly berating an employee or directing an ethnic slur towards him or her.

Drawing upon literature on evolutionary-based responses to one's environment, we propose that being exposed to interpersonal injustice elicits feelings of *socio-moral disgust*, which is disgust elicited by appraisals of contamination, impurity, or potential degradation (Marzillier & Davey, 2004; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993). Horberg et al. (2009) expanded this definition to suggest that socio-moral disgust is a "revulsion evoked by people who commit vulgar violations against others" (p. 964). We propose that socio-moral disgust activates a human alarm system that warns the body of potential danger. A consequence of this activation is that experiencing or witnessing injustice can produce involuntary physiological consequences. We hypothesize that one of these physiological consequences is heightened taste and olfactory sensitivity. We focused on taste and smell because these two sensory modalities are closely tied to disgust emotions (Rozin, 1982).

In Study 1 we explored the effects of interpersonal justice violations on disgust reactions and taste among direct victims of mistreatment. In Study 2 we tested whether these effects also occur among third party observers of mistreatment. In Study 3 we explored whether the effects from Study 2 extend to the sense of smell. Across all studies, we expected that interpersonal justice violations amplify taste and smell perceptions, and that these effects are mediated by disgust.

Background

Morality researchers have identified five foundations underlying humans' moral concerns: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (e.g. Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2007). According to the appraisal-tendency framework (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001) each domain is associated with a distinct set of emotional and motivational reactions that arise innately, meaning they are organized in advance of the experience. These reactions have been described in terms of evolutionary preparedness (Seligman, 1971). In the present research we focused on the fairness/reciprocity and purity domains because we believe the two are more closely associated with one another than previous research suggests, at least in the case of interpersonal justice violations. Other researchers (e.g., Cannon et al., 2011) have made a similar claim.

Fairness and purity as foundations of morality

The fairness/reciprocity domain concerns beliefs that people should respect each other's individual rights, reciprocate benefits received, and treat others fairly. Actions are "judged morally wrong if they are unfair or partial, create inequality, or otherwise restrict others' rights" (Horberg et al., 2009, p. 964). The primary moral emotion that arises from justice violations is anger. The purity domain, in contrast, involves values and principles that protect the sanctity of the body and soul. Purity violations are theorized to be associated with disgust. Although these values originally related to oral disgust in reactions to toxins or parasites (physical forms of impurity), they have been extended to include concerns over another individual's character and social conduct, giving rise to socio-moral disgust.

The link between unfairness and disgust warrants further investigation for several reasons. First, as noted above, the research is not entirely consistent regarding whether unfairness triggers disgust. Second, not all fairness violations are the same – indeed unfair treatment can lead to anger, but some aspects of injustice might also arouse disgust. To date, disgust researchers have studied more general forms of fairness (e.g., failing to reciprocate favors, interrupting a meeting; leaving overly small tips) and found no effects on disgust emotions.

Horberg et al. (2009), for instance, found in three studies that disgust (but not anger) amplifies the moral significance of the moral domain of purity (but not the moral domain of fairness). They observed the specific effects of impurity and purity on disgust as it arose from the reading of vignettes (Study 1) from its artificial inducement (Study 2) or from its usual experience (measurement of trait disgust in Study 3). Notice, however, that Horberg et al.'s (2009) justice violations (i.e., a student doesn't return a class textbook thus preventing another student from using it and a colleague interrupting another colleague during work meetings) might not have been construed as serious moral violations of civilized behavior. As a result, their fairness manipulation might not have been sufficiently strong to produce socio-moral disgust.

The nature of the fairness violation is germane to our theoretical argument because organizational justice researchers have identified four aspects of workplace fairness: distributive justice (the fairness of one's outcomes), procedural justice (the fairness of the procedures used to derive one's outcomes), information justice (the degree to which individuals receive an adequate explanation for decisions), and interpersonal justice (see definition above) (Colquitt, 2001). Although all four types of fairness could, in principle, elicit a moral response such as disgust, violations of interpersonal justice are arguably most likely to do so because they more clearly indicate that a person does not recognize that the other party deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. In other words, the transgressor "places him or herself above them as if superior to moral authority" (Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005, p. 217). Moreover, evidence shows that the vast majority of injustices that people report in their daily lives concern interpersonal rather than distributive or procedural issues (Mikula, Petri, & Tanzer, 1990). One might conclude that a major reason for this discrepancy is that people are more sensitized to how others treat them in social interactions because, from an evolutionary perspective, such cues are important for identifying immediate threats in their local environment (e.g., Is this person a friend or foe?). If people devote a large share of their attentional resources to processing information about interpersonal treatment, then their reactions to such treatment are likely to become more reflexive or automatic over time.

Third, other aspects of workplace injustice, such as one's pay or a company's decision making procedures can create ambiguity regarding whether mistreatment has occurred and therefore require more elaborate cognitive processing (see equity theory, Adams, 1965) to determine whether unfair treatment was intentional (see a discussion of accountability cognitions in justice perceptions; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). In contrast, interpersonal justice violations perceptions should occur more automatically and require less deliberation because they provide a relatively unambiguous signal of a moral violation from an identifiable human source (Folger & Skarlicki, 2008).

Empirical research supports our assumption that reactions to interpersonal justice violations at work have a moral basis (e.g., Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010). Reb, Goldman, Kray, and Cropanzano (2006), for instance, found that when people experienced an interpersonal justice violation, they preferred a remedy that included moral vindication of the victim, such as harsh punishment. When a distributive injustice was experienced, in contrast, then participants felt that monetary compensation was sufficient. This finding provides some support for our claim that interpersonal justice violations are the kind that are most likely to trigger disgust.

The link between moral disgust and sensory perception

The emotion of disgust has its roots in the sense of taste. Disgust comes from joining "dis" and the Latin word "gusto," meaning taste. The fact that people might experience *distaste* toward perpetrators of moral violations and feel *disgusted* by their behavior is not merely a metaphorical expression. Chapman et al. (2009) measured the activation of the levator labii muscle region of the face that is thought to demonstrate disgust expressions. They found that the same facial motor

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