



Dangerous worldview: A mediator of the relation between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism



Natalie J. Shook*, Cameron G. Ford, & Shelby T. Boggs

West Virginia University, United States

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research indicates that greater disgust sensitivity is associated with more socially conservative values. However, the mechanism by which disgust is linked to social conservatism has not been elucidated. The purpose of this research was to determine whether disgust alters social worldview, which in turn encourages the endorsement of social conservatism. Studies 1a/b and 2 provided correlational support for this model. Individuals higher in disgust sensitivity were more likely to endorse a dangerous worldview and socially conservative values. Furthermore, dangerous worldview mediated the relation between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism. Study 3 provided experimental evidence of the causal link between disgust and dangerous worldview. For those more sensitive to disgust, a disgust induction compared to a neutral condition resulted in greater endorsement of a dangerous worldview. These findings provide initial evidence of a route through which disgust influences social conservatism.

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1. Introduction

The emotion of disgust evolved to serve a disease-avoidance function (Curtis & Biran, 2001). As other individuals are a primary source of pathogen transmission, disgust plays a role in the formation of social attitudes and beliefs. In particular, disgust is positively associated with social conservatism (see Terrizzi, Shook, & McDaniel, 2013, for a review). Theoretically, social conservatism helps to promote disease avoidance by maintaining group norms and traditions, as well as encouraging out-group avoidance (Terrizzi et al., 2013; Thornhill & Fincher, 2014). However, disgust may be indirectly related to social conservatism. Motivated cognition accounts of social conservatism posit that dangerous worldviews underlie the endorsement of socially conservative values and attitudes (Duckitt, 2001; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). If disgust signals a potential disease threat in one's environment, individuals who are more sensitive to disgust may perceive their social world as generally more dangerous. As such, disgust sensitivity may alter the way one perceives their social world, which in turn would encourage the endorsement of social conservatism. The goal of the present research was to determine the extent to which disgust sensitivity is associated with greater perception of the world as a dangerous place and to assess whether dangerous worldview mediates the relation between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism.

1.1. Social worldviews

Motivated cognition perspectives posit that endorsement of conservative values is in part determined by the way individuals perceive their social world (Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2003). That is, one's understanding of the world influences the values and attitudes one holds. Individuals who perceive the world to be more threatening or dangerous tend to endorse higher levels of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and political social conservatism (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002; Perry, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2013; van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). A dangerous worldview motivates goals of security and control, which are achieved through RWA and other forms of social conservatism. Individuals who perceive the world to be more competitive and "cut-throat" tend to endorse higher levels of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and economic conservatism (Duckitt et al., 2002; Perry et al., 2013). A competitive worldview motivates goals of dominance and superiority, which are achieved through SDO and economically conservative values. Thus, according to the dual process model, RWA and SDO are rooted in distinctly different worldviews (Duckitt et al., 2002).

Social worldviews stem from individual traits and situational factors (Duckitt, 2001). Enduring traits and environmental cues influence how individuals perceive and understand their social world. Consequently, these social worldviews often mediate the relations between different personality factors or situational threats and conservative values (i.e., RWA and SDO) (Dallago, Mirisola, & Roccato, 2012; Duckitt et al., 2002; Jugert & Duckitt, 2009; Leone, Desimoni, & Chirumbolo, 2012; Weber & Federico, 2007). For example, Jugert and Duckitt (2009)

* Corresponding author at: West Virginia University, Department of Psychology, PO Box 6040, Morgantown, WV 26506-6040, United States.

E-mail address: Natalie.Shook@mail.wvu.edu (N.J. Shook).

demonstrated that a personality factor related to social conformity and an experimental social threat induction (i.e., having participants imagine a future consisting of economic and social unrest) were both associated with stronger endorsement of Dangerous World Beliefs. In turn, the heightened dangerous worldview was associated with higher levels of RWA. Thus, the dual process model posits that internal and external factors determine an individual's social worldview, which motivates endorsement of different social values and beliefs.

Although several personality and situational factors have been identified to influence social worldviews, one factor that has not been examined is disgust. Both as a stable personality trait (disgust sensitivity) and a situationally induced emotion, disgust may influence how people perceive their social world. This may help to explain the well-documented association between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism (Terrizzi et al., 2013).

1.2. Disgust

Traditionally, disgust is viewed as an emotion that evolved in order to reduce oral contamination or the ingestion of harmful substances (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Faulkner, Schaller, Park, & Duncan, 2004). For example, the smell of spoiled milk generally evokes feelings of disgust, which lead individuals not to consume the milk, preventing sickness. However, disgust is experienced in response to a number of stimuli (e.g., garbage, maggots, blood) not associated with oral contamination or ingestion. Despite their differences, these stimuli are similar in that they are all potential sources of pathogenic or parasitic infection. Thus, disgust is proposed to be a disease-avoidance mechanism (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). That is, disgust serves a protective function by encouraging individuals to avoid potential sources of infectious diseases or parasitic infection.

Although most people across cultures experience and recognize the emotion of disgust (Eckman, 1970), there is considerable variability in the extent to which individuals experience disgust, or react to potentially contaminated stimuli. Disgust sensitivity has been proposed as a stable individual difference (Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin, 1994; Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009). Individuals higher in disgust sensitivity are more likely to find stimuli disgusting and exhibit avoidance tendencies, thereby reducing exposure to potentially disease threatening stimuli. Conversely, individuals lower in disgust sensitivity are less easily disgusted and less avoidant (Druschel & Sherman, 1999).

1.3. Social attitudes

A primary means of infectious disease transmission is contact with other individuals. Historically, outgroup members may have posed a greater disease threat, because they may have carried foreign pathogens for which the individual did not have immunity. Schaller and Duncan (2007) have argued that the disease-avoidance function of disgust should encourage more negative attitudes toward outgroup members compared to ingroup members. Thus, disgust sensitivity may promote prejudice toward outgroup members as a means of disease avoidance. A considerable amount of evidence supports this link. Inducing disgust results in subsequently higher levels of prejudice toward sexual minorities (Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010) and foreigners (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). Disgust sensitivity has also been associated with higher levels of ethnocentrism (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006), as well as prejudice toward sexual minorities (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2012; Terrizzi et al., 2010) and foreigners (Navarrete & Fessler, 2006). However, the association between disgust sensitivity and prejudice is mediated by social conservatism (Hodson & Costello, 2007; Olatunji, 2008; Terrizzi et al., 2012).

Social conservatism tends to promote adherence to social norms, ingroup cohesion, and avoidance of outgroup members. These characteristics may be adaptive strategies for avoiding potentially

contaminated outgroup members, as well as maintaining group norms and customs that limit disease transmission (Terrizzi et al., 2013; Thornhill, Fincher, & Aran, 2009). Indeed, historic disease prevalence rates predict cultural endorsement of social conservatism (Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, & Schaller, 2008; Murray & Schaller, 2010; Thornhill et al., 2009). Countries with historically high rates of infectious disease tend to be characterized by higher levels of collectivism, stronger endorsement of the subordination of women, and greater sexual conservatism in women. Thus, disgust sensitivity may encourage individuals to endorse social conservatism as a means of infectious disease avoidance.

Social conservatism as a disease-avoidance strategy is supported by a growing body of research. At an individual level, disgust sensitivity is associated with several different forms of social conservatism (Shook, Terrizzi, Clay, & Oosterhoff, 2015; Terrizzi et al., 2013), such as collectivism (Clay, Terrizzi, & Shook, 2012), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Hodson & Costello, 2007), political conservatism (Inbar, Pizarro, & Bloom, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012; Terrizzi et al., 2010), and religious fundamentalism (Terrizzi et al., 2012). Inducing disgust also leads to more socially conservative attitudes toward marriage equality (Adams, Stewart, & Blanchar, 2014). Despite this evidence, the mechanism by which disgust encourages social conservatism has not been elucidated.

Potentially, the association between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism may be mediated by social worldview. As disgust generally indicates the presence of a potential contaminant or disease threat in one's environment, the experience of disgust or the dispositional tendency to be more sensitive to disgust may lead individuals to perceive their social world as more threatening, i.e., encourage a more dangerous worldview. This heightened dangerous worldview may in turn lead to the endorsement of social conservatism that promotes security and control. Evolutionarily, greater dangerous worldview in response to the experience of disgust or as a consequence of disgust sensitivity may have been adaptive. If there was an actual disease threat in one's environment, perceiving the social world as more threatening or dangerous would be beneficial. A dangerous worldview would encourage more cautious behavior when interacting with others (i.e., primary sources of disease transmission). Also, greater dangerous worldview motivates endorsement of social conservatism, which generally enforces strict adherence to social traditions and customs that may limit disease transmission (e.g., hygiene, food preparation). Thus, disgust sensitivity may be indirectly associated with social conservatism through dangerous worldview.

1.4. Present research

To date, dangerous worldview has not been examined in association with disgust sensitivity. However, according to the dual process framework, dangerous worldview may in part explain the relation between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism, which would elucidate a means by which disgust influences social attitudes. Thus, the goals of the present research were to determine the extent to which disgust sensitivity is associated with greater perception of the world as a dangerous place and to assess whether dangerous worldview mediates the relation between disgust sensitivity and social conservatism. It was expected that greater disgust sensitivity would be associated with greater perception of the world as a dangerous place. Furthermore, a more dangerous worldview would explain the endorsement of social conservatism by individuals higher in disgust sensitivity.

2. Studies 1a and 1b

The purpose of these studies was to provide initial evidence of the relations among disgust sensitivity, dangerous worldview, and social conservatism. Multiple measures of disgust sensitivity and social

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