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2011

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Citation for published version (APA):

Erlandsson, A. (2011). *Disgust-sensitivity and Moral Attitudes in Japanese College-students*. 211-211. Abstract from The 9th Biennial Conference of Asian Association of Social Psychology, Kunming, China.

Total number of authors:

1

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Disgust-sensitivity and moral attitudes in Japanese college-students

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Conclusion

Disgust-sensitivity predict non-consequentialistic attitudes in three separate aspects of morality.

Introduction

Disgust relate to moral attitudes. The most common finding is that people judge moral wrongdoings harsher when they feel disgust (Haidt & Björklund, 2008). For example, repugnant smells make us more morally condemning (Schnall et al., 2008) while hand-washing make negative evaluations less severe (Schnall, Benton & Harvey, 2008). Likewise, disgust-sensitivity as a trait predict more moralizing towards “harmless wrongdoings” (Inbar, et al. 2009; Haidt & Hersh, 2001).

Lately, it has been suggested that our emotional personalities also relate to the direction of our moral attitudes (Greene, 2008; Horberg, et al., 2009). The idea is that disgust make our evolved moral intuitions prevalent, and that these intuitions often are in conflict with consequentialistic cost-benefit thinking.

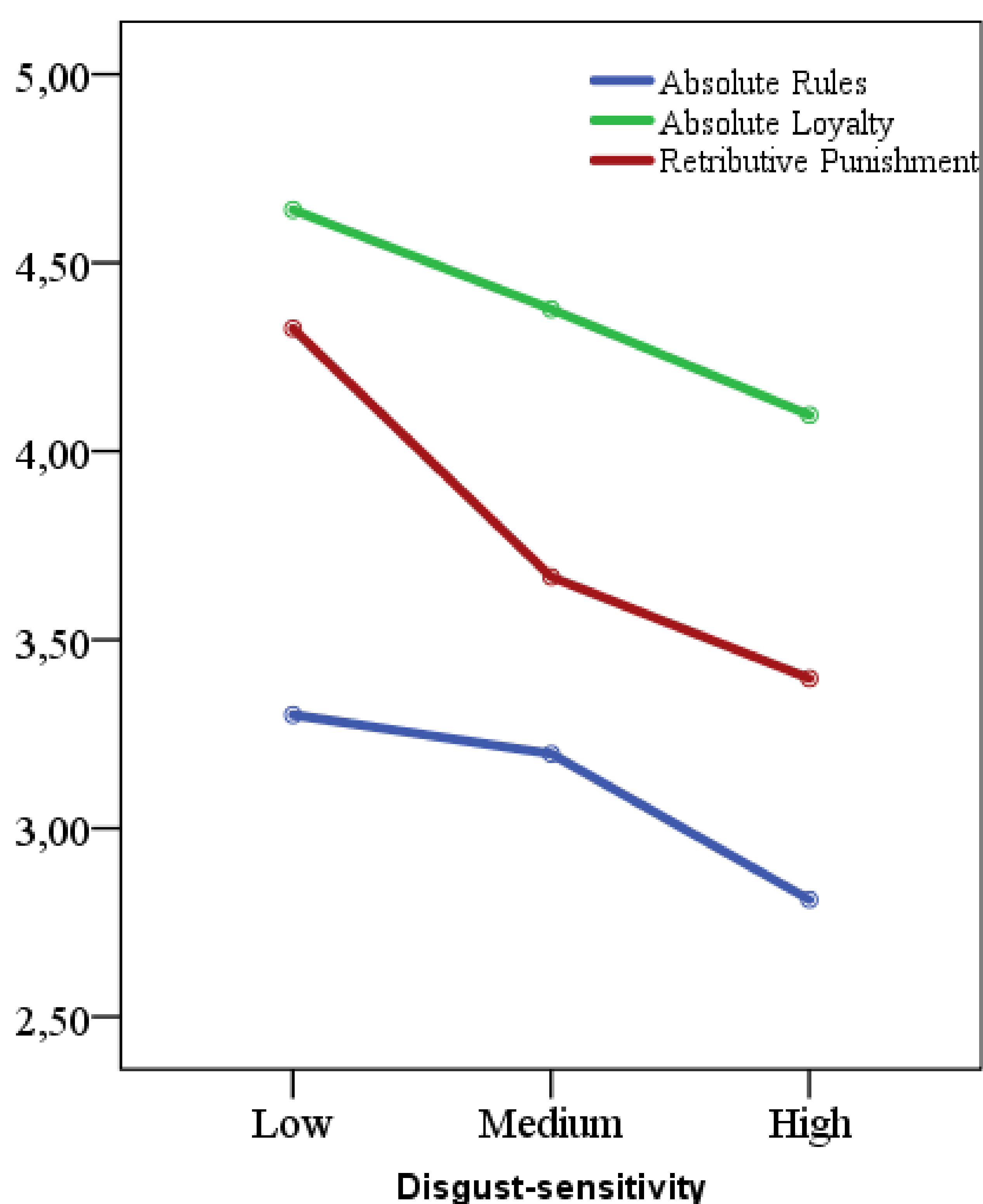
The current study aims to investigate this.

Method

236 (88 male, 148 female) Japanese college-students read nine moral dilemmas written to measure three different moral aspects where moral intuitions and consequentialistic ethics traditionally conflict (Greene, 2008).

- Breaking absolute moral rules in order to improve global consequences (kill one to save five)
- Disrespecting absolute loyalty towards kin (parents helping strangers in greater need instead of helping own children)
- Retributive punishment (punishment in order to make the criminal “suffer for his sins”)

After each vignette, participants rated which of two possible endings they believed to be morally preferable. One ending was supposed to be in line with moral intuitions and the other in line with consequentialistic ethics. Participants then rated themselves on several personality-measures including need for cognition, faith in intuition, anger-proneness and disgust-sensitivity towards death and body envelope violations.



Degree of consequentialistic attitudes in the three included aspects for participants with low, medium or high disgust-sensitivity.

Results

While the other personality-variables were unrelated to moral attitudes, disgust-sensitivity negatively correlated with consequentialistic thinking in all three categories. Disgust-sensitive students were:

- Less likely to approve of breaking rules in order to improve global consequences ($r = -.194, p < .01$).
- More positive towards absolute loyalty towards kin ($r = -.173, p < .01$).
- More positive towards retributive punishments ($r = -.283, p < .001$).

The same results were obtained using MRA.

Discussion

Although the results are correlational in nature, all three correlations are significant and point in the expected direction. Future studies should test the relation between disgust and consequentialistic moral attitudes experimentally.

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