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Disgust-sensitivity and moral attitudes in Japanese college-students.

Keywords: Disgust-sensitivity, moral attitudes, moral intuitions, consequentialistic thinking

Background: Disgust has previously been shown to 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 disgust also relate to the direction of moral attitudes (Greene, 2007; Horberg, et al., 2009). The idea is that disgust makes our moral intuitions prevalent, and that these intuitions often are in conflict with consequentialistic thinking. The current study aims to investigate this.

Method: 241 Japanese college-students read nine moral dilemmas written to measure three different moral categories where moral intuitions and predicted consequences are supposed to conflict. The categories were attitudes towards: 1) Breaking moral rules in order to improve consequences. 2) Unconditional loyalty towards family-members. 3) Retributive punishment. After each vignette, participants rated (on a 7-point scale) which of two possible endings they believed to be morally preferable. One ending was in line with moral intuitions and the other in line with consequentialism. The ratings for the three vignettes in each category were aggregated. On the final page, participants rated themselves on several personality-measures including need for cognition, faith in intuition, anger-proneness and 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: a) Less likely to approve of breaking rules in order to improve global consequences ($r = -.187, p < .01$). b) More positive towards unconditional loyalty ($r = .149, p < .05$). c) More positive towards retributive punishments ($r = .250, p < .001$).

Discussion: Although the results are correlational in nature, all three correlations are significant and point in the expected direction. This pattern suggests that disgust-sensitive students have less consequentialistic attitudes over several aspects of morality. Future studies should naturally test this relation experimentally.