

Moral Elevation and Disgust: The Influence of Emotions on Moral Judgement

Derick DeCamp, Rebecca Felegy (submitting author), Dr. Frederick Foster-Clark

Abstract

Past research has found that experiencing the emotions of disgust or moral elevation can influence one's moral judgments, but no known research has been done to empirically test and compare both emotions' influence on moral judgments in the same study, as was tested in this current study. Two individual differences were also examined: one's level of bodily sensitivity (Private Body Consciousness) and the extent to which one's moral character is central to who they are (Moral Identity), both of which have been shown in past research to influence one's ability to experience disgust and moral elevation. Participants were assigned to one of three emotion-eliciting videos. After the video, moral judgments were made in response to six vignettes. No differences between video conditions were found. Also, when levels of PBC and MI were assessed in conjunction with video condition, no interactions were found. Implications for future research are discussed.

Literature Review

Based upon Haidt's (2001) framework on emotions and moral reasoning and previous research evaluating the impact of experiencing either moral elevation or disgust on moral decision-making (e.g., Chapman & Anderson, 2014; Strohminger et al., 2011; Choe & Min, 2011), this study examined the joint impact of emotion-eliciting videos and two moderating factors on judgments about six moral dilemmas. Moral elevation refers to the feeling of warmth one experiences when acts of strong moral goodness occurs (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), while feelings of disgust are evoked by encountering something an

individual views as gross (Chapman & Anderson, 2013). Previous research has identified either Moral Identity (MI) (e.g., Aquino et al., 2011) or Private Body Consciousness (PBC) (e.g., Schnall et al., 2008) as moderating factors affecting moral judgment following elevation and/or disgust manipulations. No previous research we know of has examined disgust and moral elevation and their influences on moral judgments simultaneously, which this current study was designed to do. Also, multiple studies have recently drawn into question Schnall et al.'s (2008) research, including a meta-analysis (e.g., Landy and Goodwin, 2015; Johnson et al., 2016). The present study

Figure 1

Moral Vignette: Trolley

Karen is at the wheel of a runaway trolley quickly approaching a fork in the tracks. On the tracks extending to the left is a group of five railway workmen. On the tracks extending to the right is a single railway workman. If Karen does nothing the trolley will proceed to the left, causing the deaths of the five workmen. The only way to avoid the deaths of these workmen is to hit a switch on Karen's dashboard that will cause the trolley to proceed to the right, causing the death of the single workman. How wrong is it for Karen to hit the switch in order to avoid the deaths of the five workmen?

Perfectly
Ok

Extremely
Wrong

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

is an extension and replication of Schnall et al.'s (2008) fourth experiment, which examined the video manipulation of disgust and its influence on moral judgment. One of our hypotheses was that individuals with higher levels of PBC in the elevation and disgust conditions would have harsher moral judgments in comparison to the control condition. Also, those higher in MI scores in the elevation condition would have harsher moral judgments than the control. Overall, we hypothesized that the elevation and disgust conditions would lead to harsher moral judgments than the control with no differences between the two groups.

Method

Over 200 college students from psychology courses completed an online survey measuring PBC (Miller et al., 1981) and MI (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Based on these scores, 89 participants were selected for the experimental portion of the study, based upon having relatively low or high scores on either PBC or MI. Experimental participants were assigned to one of three video conditions including disgust, moral elevation, or the control. An earlier study had participants rate different videos on the degree to which they elicited various

emotions to select videos for the present study. After viewing their assigned video, each participant rated six moral judgment vignettes (adapted from Schnall et al., 2008) on a wrongness scale from 0 (Perfectly OK) to 9 (Extremely Wrong). For the purposes of this paper, the trolley vignette was utilized to illustrate the conclusions of our research, as its response characteristics made the most sense to report on. The trolley vignette can be found above in Figure 1.

Results

Separate two-way ANOVAs (analysis of variance) with video condition (elevation vs. disgust vs. control) as one factor and each of the moderators (high vs. low on PBC and MI) as a second factor were run to examine impacts on moral judgments of the trolley vignette. Tests of the main effects for video condition, PBC, and MI were not significant ($F(2,36) = 0.398, p = 0.674, \eta^2 = .022$; $F(1,36) = 2.445, p = 0.127, \eta^2 = .064$; and $F(1,41) = 1.493, p = 0.229, \eta^2 = .035$, respectively). As displayed in the first panel of Table 1 below, no main effect of video condition was found for the trolley vignette, as the mean wrongness ratings for each group only slightly differed. Interactions of emotional video condition and each of the

Table 1

Means and (standard deviations) for wrongness of trolley vignette overall and for those low and high in Private Body Consciousness (PBC).

Video Condition	Control ^a 4.12 (1.99)		Disgust ^b 3.25 (2.19)		Elevation ^c 3.42 (1.88)	
Moderator	<u>Low PBC^d</u> 3.50 (2.56)	<u>High PBC^e</u> 4.25 (2.06)	<u>Low PBC^f</u> 2.86 (2.19)	<u>High PBC^g</u> 4.38 (3.07)	<u>Low PBC^h</u> 2.40 (0.90)	<u>High PBCⁱ</u> 3.70 (2.16)

^a*n* = 26, ^b*n* = 32, ^c*n* = 31, ^d*n* = 8, ^e*n* = 4, ^f*n* = 7, ^g*n* = 8, ^h*n* = 5, ⁱ*n* = 10.

moderators were also non-significant ($F(2,36) = 0.085$, $p = 0.919$, $\eta^2 = .005$, for PBC; $F(2,41) = 2.060$, $p = 0.140$, $\eta^2 = .091$, for MI). Although those higher in PBC were harsher in judgments for each of the three video conditions, as demonstrated by a comparison of group wrongness means in panel two of Table 1, these differences were not statistically significant. Those viewing the Disgust video who had high PBC did not have significantly higher wrongness ratings than those with high PBC in the Control condition, which failed to support our hypothesis. Findings for MI are not reported, as they yielded similar patterns to that of the PBC results.

Discussion

The current study tested the role of emotions on moral judgment (in particular, the causal influence hypothesis (Pözlner, 2015)) for two emotions, elevation and disgust. One of our hypotheses was that those high in PBC would have harsher judgments in the disgust condition when compared to individuals in the control condition. This research revealed that the overall pattern of results did not support this hypothesis, which were based on this theory. No statistically reliable associations were found between manipulated emotional states and moral

judgments, even when controlling for the moderating influence of two factors shown in previous research to impact the influence of emotions. It should be noted, however, that sample size for the moderator analyses were low resulting in low power to detect effects. This current study was not able to replicate the results found in Schnall et al.'s (2008) fourth experiment. Instead, this research paralleled Johnson et al.'s (2016) study which, like ours, showed that disgust did not significantly influence moral judgment, even under the condition of high PBC. Interestingly, we did detect a significant effect for the order in which the six vignettes were presented, which may have implications for moral judgment researchers. There was some indication that grouping of certain types of moral dilemmas may somehow amplify the feeling of disgust and lead to variations in responding. Future studies should use larger sample sizes and tighten experimental controls to gain power. While manipulation checks did suggest the effectiveness of the emotion-eliciting videos, further confirmation of their construct validity would be appropriate. Further research could also make use of more stringent counter-balancing strategies regarding the moral judgment vignettes.

References

- Algoe, S. B., & Haidt, J. (2009). Witnessing excellence in action: The 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*(2), 105-127. doi:10.1080/17439760802650519
- Aquino, K., McFerran, B., & Laven, M. (2011). Moral identity and the experience of moral elevation in response to acts of uncommon goodness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100*(4), 703-718. doi:10.1037/a0022540
- Aquino, K., & Reed, A. I. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(6), 1423-1440. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1423
- Chapman, H. A., & Anderson, A. K. (2013). Things rank and gross in nature: A review and synthesis of moral disgust. *Psychological Bulletin, 139*(2), 300-327. doi:10.1037/a0030964
- Chapman, H. A., & Anderson, A. K. (2014). Trait physical disgust is related to moral judgments outside of the purity domain. *Emotion, 14*(2), 341-348. doi:10.1037/a0035120
- Choe, S. Y., & Min, K. (2011). Who makes utilitarian judgments? The influences of emotions on utilitarian judgments. *Judgment and Decision Making, 6*(7), 580-592.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review, 108*(4), 814-834. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814
- Johnson, D. J., Wortman, J., Cheung, F., Hein, M., Lucas, R. E., Donnellan, M. B., & ... Narr, R. K. (2016). The effects of disgust on moral judgments: Testing moderators. *Social Psychological And Personality Science, 7*(7), 640-647. doi:10.1177/1948550616654211
- Landy, J. F., & Goodwin, G. P. (2015). Does incidental disgust amplify moral judgment? A meta-analytic review of experimental evidence. *Perspectives On Psychological Science, 10*(4), 518-536. doi:10.1177/1745691615583128
- Miller, L. C., Murphy, R., & Buss, A. H. (1981). Consciousness of body: Private and public. *Journal of Personality And Social Psychology, 41*(2), 397-406. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.41.2.397
- Pözlner, T. (2015). Moral judgments and emotions: A less intimate relationship than recently claimed. *Journal Of Theoretical And Philosophical Psychology, 35*(3), 177-195. doi:10.1037/teo0000022
- Schnall, S., Haidt, J., Clore, G. L., & Jordan, A. H. (2008). Disgust as embodied moral

judgment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(8), 1096-1109.

doi:10.1177/0146167208317771

Strohminger, N., Lewis, R. L., & Meyer, D. E. (2011). Divergent effects of different positive emotions on moral judgment. *Cognition*, 119(2), 295-300.

doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2010.12.012

Recommended Citation

DeCamp, D., Felegy, R., & Foster-Clark, F. (2020). Moral elevation and disgust: The influence of emotions on moral judgement. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/felegy-2020>