Easily grossed out? You're more likely a conservative

June 3 2009, By Lauren Gold

(PhysOrg.com) -- Are you someone who squirms when confronted with slime, shudders at stickiness or gets grossed out by gore? Do crawly insects make you cringe or dead bodies make you blanch?

If so, chances are you're more conservative -- politically, and especially in your attitudes toward gays and lesbians -- than your less-squeamish counterparts, according to two Cornell studies.

The results, said study leader David Pizarro, Cornell assistant professor of psychology, raise questions about the role of disgust -- an emotion that likely evolved in humans to keep them safe from potentially hazardous or disease-carrying environments -- in contemporary judgments of morality and purity.

In the first study, published in the journal Cognition & Emotion (Vol.23: No.4), Pizarro and co-authors Yoel Inbar of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and Paul Bloom of Yale University surveyed 181 U.S. adults from politically mixed "swing states." They subjected these adults to two indexes: the Disgust Sensitivity Scale (DSS), which offers various scenarios to assess disgust sensitivity, and a political ideology scale. From this they found a correlation between being more easily disgusted and political conservatism.

To test whether disgust sensitivity is linked to specific conservative attitudes, the researchers then surveyed 91 Cornell undergraduates with the DSS, as well as with questions about their positions on issues

including gay marriage, abortion, gun control, labor unions, tax cuts and affirmative action.

Participants who rated higher in disgust sensitivity were more likely to oppose gay marriage and abortion, issues that are related to notions of morality or purity. The researchers also found a weak correlation between disgust sensitivity and support for tax cuts, but no link between disgust sensitivity and the other issues.

And in a separate study in the current issue of the journal Emotion (Vol.9: No.3), Pizarro and colleagues found a link between higher disgust sensitivity and disapproval of gays and lesbians. For this study, the researchers used implicit measures (measures that have been shown to assess attitudes people may be unwilling to report explicitly; or that they may not even know they possess).

Liberals and conservatives disagree about whether disgust has a valid place in making moral judgments, Pizarro noted. Conservatives have argued that there is inherent wisdom in repugnance; that feeling disgusted about something -- gay sex between consenting adults, for example -- is cause enough to judge it wrong or immoral, even lacking a concrete reason. Liberals tend to disagree, and are more likely to base judgments on whether an action or a thing causes actual harm.

Studying the link between disgust and moral judgment could help explain the strong differences in people's moral opinions, Pizarro said; and it could offer strategies for persuading some to change their views.

"People have pointed out for a long time that a lot of our moral values seem driven by emotion, and in particular, disgust appears to be one of those emotions that seems to be recruited for moral judgments," said Pizarro.

That can have tragic effects -- as in cases throughout history where minorities have been victims of discrimination by groups that perceived them as having disgusting characteristics.

The research speaks to a need for caution when forming moral judgments, Pizarro added. "Disgust really is about protecting yourself from disease; it didn't really evolve for the purpose of human morality," he said. "It clearly has become central to morality, but because of its origins in contamination and avoidance, we should be wary about its influences."

Provided by Cornell University (news : web)

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