

Cleanliness can compromise moral judgment

December 1 2008

New research in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science has found that the physical notion of cleanliness significantly reduces the severity of moral judgments, showing that intuition, rather than deliberate reasoning can influence our perception of what is right and wrong. Lead researcher, Simone Schnall explains the relevance of the findings to everyday life; "When we exercise moral judgment, we believe we are making a conscious, rational decision, but this research shows that we are subconsciously influenced by how clean or 'pure' we feel.

"Take for example the situation of a jury member or voting in an election - if the jury member had washes their hands prior to delivering their verdict, they may judge the crime less harshly.

"Similarly, someone may find it easier to overlook a political misdemeanor had they performed an action that made them feel 'clean' prior to casting their vote."

The research was conducted through two experiments with university students. In the first, they were asked to complete a scrambled sentence task involving 40 sets of four words each. By underlining any three words, a sentence could be formed. For the neutral condition, the task contained 40 sets of neutral words, but for the cleanliness condition, half of the sets contained words such as 'pure, washed, clean, immaculate, and pristine'. The participants were then asked to rate a series of moral dilemmas including keeping money found inside a wallet, putting false information on a resume and killing a terminally ill plane crash survivor

in order to avoid starvation.

The second experiment saw the students watch a 'disgusting' film clip before rating the same moral dilemmas. However, half the group were asked to first wash their hands.

The findings from both experiments demonstrated that those who were subject to the cognitive feeling of cleanliness exercised less severe moral judgment than their counterparts.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Cleanliness can compromise moral judgment (2008, December 1) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-12-cleanliness-compromise-moral-judgment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.