

Bad people are disgusting, bad actions are angering

December 15 2016



Credit: Association for Psychological Science

A person's character, more so than their actions, determines whether we find immoral acts to be 'disgusting,' according to new research in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological

Science.

"We wanted to know why moral transgressions can be disgusting even when they don't involve the kinds of things that typically disgust us, like body products, insects, and rotting foods," says psychological scientist and study co-author Hanah Chapman of Brooklyn College, the City University of New York. "We found that what drives moral disgust seems to be the character of the transgressor—who they are more so than what they do."

The worse someone's character is, says Chapman, the more disgusting people typically find them to be.

The research was prompted by differing findings regarding how our judgments of moral violations evoke specific emotional responses: [anger](#) and disgust.

Anger and disgust are often felt together when we think about someone else's wrongdoing, but the emotion that predominates can shape how we act. Previous work by first author Roger Giner-Sorolla of the University of Kent had shown that violating taboos is likely to elicit disgust, while violating people's rights tends to elicit anger. But work by Chapman and others had shown that people sometimes report disgust more so than anger in response to acts that violate a person's rights.

Giner-Sorolla and Chapman decided to collaborate and test the idea that focusing on a person's bad character might be what leads us to feel of disgust in response to harm and other rights violations.

In an online study, 87 American adults read and evaluated two scenarios. In one scenario, a man finds out that his long-term girlfriend has cheated on him and he beats her. In the other scenario, a man finds out that his long-term girlfriend has cheated on him and he beats the girlfriend's cat.

The participants evaluated the nature of the act, rating which act was more immoral, which act should be punished more severely, and which act deserves more blame. They also evaluated the nature of the two men, responding to questions gauging which man was more likely to be sadistic and which man was more likely to be empathetic.

Using both photos of facial expressions and verbal descriptions, the participants rated their relative disgust and anger.

In regards to the act itself, people tended to judge the act of beating the cat as less morally wrong than beating the girlfriend. But they tended to judge the moral character of the man who beat the cat as worse than that of the man who beat his girlfriend.

And the emotion ratings indicated that such negative character evaluations were associated with greater disgust, but not greater anger.

In two additional studies, participants read a series of different moral scenarios that varied according to whether the main character wanted to hurt someone (a sign of bad character, regardless of the outcome) and whether someone was actually hurt. In line with the first study, when the main character wanted to hurt someone, participants reported feeling disgust more than anger, even when no actual harm was done. And when the character caused harm unintentionally, participants reported more anger than disgust.

Overall, the findings suggest that we tend to feel more [disgust](#) when we judge someone to be a "bad person," but we tend to feel more anger when we evaluate someone's "bad actions."

Despite these overall trends in the data, the researchers note that the findings were complex and warrant further investigation.

Ultimately, the research "can help us understand why we feel these emotions," says Giner-Sorolla. And it shows "that two scholars with opposing ideas can get together and work out a way to resolve them."

The hypotheses, method, and analysis plan for Study 1 were preregistered at the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at osf.io/ynvhz/. All materials have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework and can be accessed at osf.io/ynvhz/ (Study 1) and osf.io/x7bfj/ (Studies 2 and 3). The complete Open Practices Disclosure for this article can be found at pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data. This article has received the badge for Open Materials. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/1.%20View%20the%20Badges/ and pss.sagepub.com/content/25/1/3.full.

More information: R. Giner-Sorolla et al, Beyond Purity: Moral Disgust Toward Bad Character, *Psychological Science* (2016). DOI: [10.1177/0956797616673193](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797616673193)

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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