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The self in moral judgement: How self-affirmation affects the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboo violations

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BRIEF REPORT

The self in moral judgement: How self-affirmation affects the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboo violations

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People frequently condemn harmless sexual taboo behaviours. Based on self-affirmation theory, we predicted that providing an opportunity to self-affirm decreases the tendency to morally condemn harmless sexual taboos. In Experiment 1, we found evidence that self-affirmation decreases the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboos and ruled out that this was due to a decrease in how disgusting participants considered taboo acts. In Experiment 2, we replicated this effect and demonstrated the mediating role of self-directed threat emotions. These results demonstrate that the tendency to morally condemn harmless sexual taboos arises in part from the need to protect self-integrity. We discuss the implications for the role of the self and emotions in moral judgements and interventions aimed at increasing the acceptability of harmless sexual taboos.

Keywords: Self-affirmation; Moral judgements; Harmless taboo violations; Self-threat; Emotions.

As long as no harm is done and no rights are violated, one might expect society to be accepting towards the sexual behaviour of others. Nevertheless, people frequently condemn harmless sexual behaviours that they consider taboo. For instance, when confronted with a brother and sister who engage in consensual and safe sex, people are rarely accepting. Rather, they condemn it strongly and persist in their moral judgement even when it is pointed out that the behaviour is harmless and

agreed upon by both parties (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). In the current research, we propose that this tendency to morally condemn harmless sexual taboo behaviours arises, at least partially, from the need to protect self-integrity. We further argue that self-directed emotions indicative of self-integrity threats may underlie such self-protective moral judgements.

Self-integrity can be defined as the sense that “on the whole, one is a good and appropriate

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person” (Sherman & Cohen, 2006, p. 186). The standard for what constitutes a good and appropriate person depends, however, on cultural and social standards (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Potential threats to self-integrity thus entail failing to live up to social standards, such as when one fails to behave pro-socially or maintain close relationships. Despite being highly motivated to avoid such threatening situations, people sometimes experience self-integrity threats and react defensively to protect the integrity of the self (Steele, 1988). We argue that the moral condemnation of sexual taboo behaviour can be a defensive reaction aimed at protecting self-integrity. That is, morally condemning harmless sexual taboo behaviour may affirm the self as upholding an important social standard.

The theoretical rationale for this conjecture follows from the definition of a sexual taboo and its implications. A sexual taboo can be described as a vehemently held and strongly enforced social standard regarding sexuality (Akerlof, 1976). Engaging in sexual taboo behaviour is therefore heavily morally condemned and punished, and can lead to social exclusion (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). Research has demonstrated that the enforcement of taboo standards helps a group stay cohesive and group members cooperative (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). People may therefore not only be reluctant to avoid engaging in such behaviour, but they may also be motivated to show their moral disapproval as a way to protect their self-integrity. Indeed, feeling like a good and appropriate person also depends on the extent to which one upholds social and cultural standards (Anthony, Wood, & Holmes, 2007; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, upholding a taboo standard through expressing one’s moral condemnation may protect and affirm self-integrity.

Our theorising on self-affirmation and moral judgement is not meant to replace existing models of moral judgement but is aimed at providing an additional reason for why people morally condemn harmless taboo violations. More specifically, according to intuitionist accounts of moral judgements, people mainly condemn harmless transgressions because they experience a strong feeling of disgust (Haidt, 2001; Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008). An important aspect of such intuitive judgements is therefore the extent to which people consider an act disgusting (Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009; Inbar, Pizzaro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009) and the extent to which a judgement can be an expression of one’s disgust (Tybur, Lieberman, Kurzban, & DeScioli, 2013). We argue that *in addition* to moral judgement being an expression of how disgusting one considers the act, people also express their moral condemnation in order to protect and reaffirm their self-integrity. Indeed, being confronted with a harmless sexual taboo may open up the threatening possibility of failing to uphold an important social standard (cf. Tetlock, 2003). This threat to one’s self-integrity then motivates the (re)affirmation of self-integrity through the expression of a negative moral judgement. As such, the moral condemnation of a harmless sexual taboo violation can serve the additional goal of affirming one’s positive self-image—a goal that we argue can be distinguished from moral judgement’s function as disgust expression.

PRESENT RESEARCH

We tested this idea in two experiments.¹ Specifically, we provided participants with either an opportunity or no opportunity to affirm personally important values and measured the extent to

¹ For both experiments, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations and all measures in this study. Specifically, consistent with the recommendations of Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2011), we decided for Experiment 1 to recruit and run 25 participants for every condition. For Experiment 2, we then calculated the total amount of participants we needed using G-power. Based on the effect size of Experiment 1 (approximately, Cohen’s $d = .70$), we determined that we also needed 50 participants (25 in every condition) to reach a power of .80. No data of the participants were deleted from both data-sets, no additional variables were measured and no additional manipulations occurred. All manipulations, participants who were part of this study and variables that were measured, are therefore reported in the current study.

which they considered two harmless sexual taboo violations morally wrong and morally acceptable. We predicted that self-affirmed participants would morally condemn these taboos less than non-affirmed participants. The rationale for this prediction is drawn from the notion that affirming one's values reminds people that they can derive part of their self-integrity from different aspects of their lives instead of the specific threat that is faced (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Steele, 1988). Value affirmations, in other words, buffer people against displaying typical defensive responses by bringing about a more broad and expansive view of the self that includes other sources of self-integrity (e.g., values).

For the current research purposes, this implies that if the moral condemnation of a harmless sexual taboo act is driven by the need to protect self-integrity then an opportunity to self-affirm values should decrease people's moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboo behaviours. Additional evidence for this idea comes from Sherman and Cohen (2006) who state that:

Much research within the self-affirmation framework examines whether an affirmation of self-integrity, unrelated to a specific provoking threat can attenuate or eliminate people's normal response to that threat. If it does one can infer that the response was motivated by a desire to protect self-integrity. (p. 187)

Moreover, we predicted that if the moral condemnation of a harmless sexual taboo act serves to protect self-integrity then the relationship between self-affirmation and moral judgement should be explained by emotions that stem from a concern to protect the self against self-integrity threats. In other words, emotions reflecting perceived self-threats should mediate the relationship between self-affirmation and moral judgement. We operationalised such self-threat emotions as *self-directed* emotions that stem from a concern to protect the self, such as feeling attacked, threatened, miserable and anxious (cf. Tangney & Tracey, 2012).

EXPERIMENT 1

Experiment 1 tested the core prediction that an opportunity to self-affirm decreases the moral

condemnation of harmless sexual taboo violations. Moreover, to rule out that self-affirmation simply decreases the extent to which people consider the sexual taboo disgusting and hereby decreases negative moral judgements, we also measured how disgusting participants considered the harmless sexual taboo acts.

Method

Participants, design and procedure

Forty-nine paid undergraduates at Leiden University (31 women, $M_{age} = 21.71$ years, $SD_{age} = 4.47$) provided informed consent, were randomly assigned to a self-affirmation or non-affirmation condition and were fully debriefed after completing this study.

Self-affirmation manipulation

Participants first completed a frequently used self-affirmation procedure that has been shown to affirm self-integrity through reminding people of their core values (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; McQueen & Klein, 2006; Van Dijk, Van Koningsbruggen, Ouwerkerk, & Wesseling, 2011). Participants were presented with the six values (science, business, art, social, politics and religion) of the Allport–Vernon–Lindzey study of Values (AVL; Allport, Vernon, & Lindzey, 1960), which they ranked according to personal importance. They then completed one of the AVL subscales that consist of 10 statements with two possible answers and were asked to choose between the answers. For every statement, one answer reflected the scale's main value and the other reflected one of the remaining five values. Participants in the self-affirmation condition completed the scale that matched their previously indicated most important value. Participants in the non-affirmation condition completed the scale that matched their least important value. Thus, for participants in the self-affirmation condition, it was possible to affirm their most important value 10 times, whereas participants in the non-affirmation condition were not given this opportunity.

Harmless sexual taboos

Participants then evaluated two sexual acts that violate strong sexual standards (i.e., incest and bestiality) but that are essentially harmless (cf. Haidt, 2001; Haidt et al., 1993). The first taboo act consisted of two siblings named Mark and Linda, who decide to engage in sexual intercourse but take all the necessary precautions to avoid pregnancy. As such, there is no chance of reproduction. Furthermore, they decide not to repeat this act and not to tell anyone about it. The second taboo act consisted of a man who purchases a dead chicken, has sex with it in the privacy of his own home and then cooks and eats it.

Disgust

For each taboo act, participants indicated on a seven-point scale how disgusting they considered the behaviour (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*).

Moral condemnation

Participants indicated on seven-point scales how morally wrong (1 = *not morally wrong*; 7 = *completely morally wrong*) and morally acceptable (1 = *not morally acceptable at all*; 7 = *completely morally acceptable*) they considered each of the taboo acts. The moral-acceptability item was reverse coded and averaged with the first moral-condemnation item to form a moral-condemnation scale (Spearman–Brown's ρ s were .84 and .86 for incest and bestiality taboo, respectively²).

Results and discussion

Self-affirmation manipulation

Results showed that our self-affirmation manipulation was successful in affirming self-integrity. Total scores on the affirmation task ranged from 0

to 10 (with higher scores indicating higher affirmation). An independent sample t -test with self-affirmation as independent variable and number of times participants endorsed the manipulated value as dependent variable showed, as intended, that self-affirmed participants endorsed the manipulated value more often ($M = 6.46$, $SD = 1.91$) than non-affirmed participants ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.75$), $t(47) = 7.89$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.30$.

Disgust

Replicating previous research, disgust significantly predicted moral condemnation for both the incest and bestiality taboo ($\beta = .54$, $t[48] = 4.41$, $p < .001$, and $\beta = .61$, $t[48] = 5.28$, $p < .001$, respectively)³. Moreover, a repeated-measures ANOVA with self-affirmation as independent variable and disgust ratings for both taboo acts as repeated measure showed that participants considered the incest taboo ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 2.04$) less disgusting than the bestiality taboo ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.25$), $F(1, 47) = 20.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$. Importantly, no main effect of self-affirmation or interaction effect was observed, $F_s < 1$.

Moral condemnation

A repeated-measures ANOVA with self-affirmation as independent variable and moral condemnation for each taboo acts as repeated measures yielded a main effect of self-affirmation, $F(1, 47) = 8.27$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$. There was no difference in moral condemnation between the sexual taboos and no interaction effect, $F_s < 1$.

Follow-up analyses showed that self-affirmed participants condemned the incest taboo less ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.69$) than non-affirmed participants ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.01$), $F(1, 47) = 6.67$, $p = .013$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. Furthermore, self-affirmed participants also condemned the bestiality taboo less ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.79$) than non-affirmed participants

² The Spearman–Brown reliability statistic is preferred over both the Pearson's correlation and Cronbach's α for assessing the reliability of two-item scales (Eisinga, te Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013).

³ The interaction effect between self-affirmation and disgust was also significant for the incest taboo. However, self-affirmed participants relied *more* on disgust in making a moral judgement [$\beta = .70$, $t(24) = 4.62$, $p < .001$] compared to non-affirmed participants [$\beta = .28$, $t(24) = 1.39$, $p = .18$]. This could therefore not explain the *decrease* in moral condemnation after self-affirmation.

($M = 5.84$, $SD = 1.30$), $F(1, 47) = 4.88$, $p = .032$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$.

Mediation analysis

Confirming that disgust did not mediate the effect of self-affirmation on moral judgement, results from bootstrap analyses with 10,000 resamples (cf. Preacher & Hayes, 2004) indicated that for the incest taboo, the 95% confidence interval (CI) for the indirect effect of disgust contained zero $[-.37, .11]$. Similarly, the 95% CI for the indirect effect of disgust for the bestiality taboo also contained zero $[-.49, .13]$. This demonstrates that the link between self-affirmation and moral judgement was not explained by a decrease in how disgusting people considered the taboo acts.

EXPERIMENT 2

Experiment 2 aimed to directly replicate the observed effect of self-affirmation on moral judgements and provide additional evidence for the self-protective function of moral judgements by demonstrating that self-directed threat emotions mediate the link between self-affirmation and decreased moral condemnation.

Method

Participants and design

Fifty paid undergraduates at Leiden University (38 women, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.70$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 6.04$) provided informed consent, were randomly assigned to a self-affirmation or non-affirmation condition and were fully debriefed after completing this study.

Procedure

Self-affirmation manipulation

Participants completed the same self-affirmation procedure as in Experiment 1.

Harmless sexual taboos

Participants evaluated the same two sexual taboos as in Experiment 1.

Self-threat emotions

For each taboo act, participants indicated how threatened, attacked, miserable, dirty and anxious the taboo acts made them feel (on seven-point scales, ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). Thus, we measured self-threat emotions by assessing self-directed emotions and measuring it twice: once for each taboo act. The items were averaged for each taboo act separately to form two scales of self-threat emotions (Cronbach's α s were .91 for incest taboo and .95 for bestiality taboo, respectively).

Moral condemnation

Participants indicated their moral condemnation similar to Experiment 1. Again, the moral-acceptability item was reverse coded, and the two judgement items were averaged to form a moral-condemnation scale ($\rho = .62$ for bestiality taboo)⁴.

Results and discussion

Self-affirmation manipulation

Results showed that our self-affirmation manipulation was successful in affirming self-integrity. An independent sample t -test with self-affirmation as independent variable and number of times participants endorsed the manipulated value as dependent variable showed that, as intended, self-affirmed participants endorsed the manipulated value more often ($M = 6.29$, $SD = 2.05$) than non-affirmed participants ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.78$), $t(48) = 6.35$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.83$.

Self-threat emotions

Self-threat emotions significantly predicted moral condemnation for both the bestiality and incest taboos ($\beta = .35$, $t[49] = 2.55$, $p = .014$, and $\beta = .52$,

⁴Due to a technical error, the item measuring moral acceptability for the incest taboo was not measured. For this taboo, the following analyses will therefore only be performed on the item that measured how morally wrong participants considered the taboo.

$t[49] = 4.19, p = .001$, respectively). Moreover, a repeated-measures ANOVA with self-affirmation as independent variable and self-threat emotions for both taboo acts as repeated measure showed that participants experienced more self-directed threat emotions in response to the incest taboo ($M = 4.77, SD = 1.46$) than in response to the bestiality taboo ($M = 3.96, SD = 1.68$), $F(1, 48) = 22.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .32$. Importantly, this analysis also yielded a main effect of self-affirmation, $F(1, 48) = 5.19, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = .10$. No interaction effect was observed, $F < 1$.

Follow-up analyses indicated that self-affirmed participants experienced less self-threat emotions in response to the incest taboo ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.63$) compared to non-affirmed participants ($M = 5.23, SD = 1.14$), $F(1, 48) = 5.87, p = .019, \eta_p^2 = .11$. They also experienced marginally significant less self-threat emotions in response to the bestiality taboo ($M = 3.52, SD = 1.81$) compared to non-affirmed participants ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.47$), $F(1, 48) = 3.30, p = .076, \eta_p^2 = .06$.

Moral condemnation

Replicating Experiment 1, a repeated-measures ANOVA with self-affirmation as independent variable and moral condemnation for each taboo act as repeated measure yielded a main effect of self-affirmation, $F(1, 48) = 7.46, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .14$. There was no difference in moral condemnation between the taboo acts and no interaction effect, $F_s < 1$.

Follow-up analyses demonstrated that self-affirmed participants condemned the incest taboo less ($M = 4.71, SD = 2.14$) than non-affirmed participants ($M = 5.69, SD = 1.19$), $F(1, 48) = 4.13, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .08$. Furthermore, self-affirmed participants also condemned the bestiality taboo less ($M = 4.71, SD = 1.77$) than non-affirmed participants ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 48) = 6.43, p = .015, \eta_p^2 = .12$.

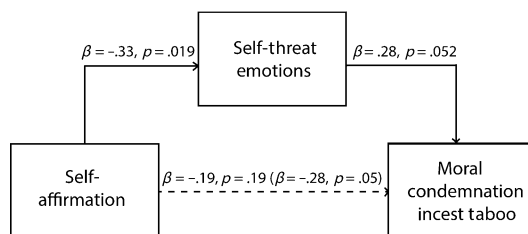


Figure 1. Mediation analysis for incest taboo Experiment 2. Self-affirmation is coded as 1 and non-affirmation as -1. Beta weights are standardised.

Mediation analysis

Using the mediation macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), we conducted a set of linear regressions using coefficients from 10,000 bootstrap samples. This allowed us to test whether self-directed threat emotions mediated the link between self-affirmation and moral condemnation. Results demonstrated that for the incest taboo, the 95% CI for the indirect effect did not contain zero, $[-.44, -.03]$. Similarly, the 95% CI for the bestiality taboo did not contain zero, $[-.47, -.01]$.⁵ Moreover, as reported in Figures 1 and 2, self-directed threat emotions decreased the significant direct effect of self-affirmation on moral judgement to non-significance. Taken together, this demonstrates that self-directed emotions fully mediated the link between self-affirmation and

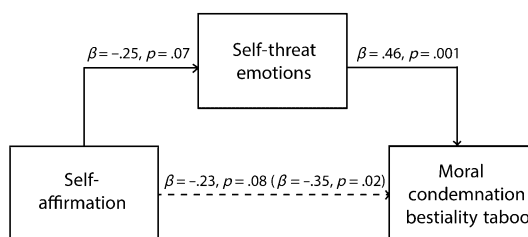


Figure 2. Mediation analysis for bestiality taboo Experiment 2. Self-affirmation is coded as 1 and non-affirmation as -1. Beta weights are standardised.

⁵ One could argue that feeling dirty is conceptually linked to how disgusting participants considered the taboo act. However, when feeling dirty was removed from the self-threat scales (α s were .88 for incest taboo and .94 for bestiality taboo), the indirect effect of self-threat emotions remained significant (95% CI = $[-.48, -.06]$ for incest taboo, 95% CI = $[-.53, -.02]$ for bestiality taboo). This provides additional evidence that self-threat emotions, but not disgust, mediated the effect of self-affirmation on moral judgement.

the moral condemnation of both harmless sexual taboos.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The findings from both experiments demonstrate that affirming self-integrity decreases the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboo acts. Furthermore, self-directed threat emotions mediated the effect of self-affirmation on the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboo transgressions. Overall, these results provide converging evidence that self-integrity plays an important role in the moral condemnation of harmless taboo violations and supports the hypothesis that the tendency to morally condemn harmless taboo violations may arise from the need to protect self-integrity.

These findings contribute to a further understanding of the psychological basis of moral judgements and the moral condemnation of harmless sexual taboos in particular. Indeed, according to the social intuitionist model, harmless sexual taboos are morally condemned because they give rise to gut feelings of disgust (Haidt, 2001). Our findings suggest that such intuitive gut feelings also signal to the decision-maker that they are about to compromise an important social standard and hereby undermine their self-integrity. This account of social intuitionism provides an additional explanation for why people are sometimes so reluctant to accept harmless taboos and find it so hard to provide a coherent justification for their judgement (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). Indeed, people rarely admit their defensive reactions because doing so would reinstate the self-threat and further undermine their self-integrity (Galinsky, Stone, & Cooper, 2000).

Moreover, our findings demonstrate that self-directed threat emotions, but not the extent to which participants considered the sexual taboo as disgusting, explained the effect of self-affirmation on moral judgements. This is surprising considering previous research that demonstrated the importance of disgust in moral judgements (Tybur et al., 2013). Although not a central focus in the

current study, our findings suggest that it might be important to distinguish between emotions that are targeted at the transgression and emotions that are focused on the self. Although both may have similar effects on moral judgements, their effects may be independent. Some self-focused emotions can result from observing a transgression and can reflect perceived threats to self-integrity. Future research may therefore try to measure and/or manipulate both types of emotions to verify their independence and study their unique contribution to moral judgement.

The theoretical principles we have outlined and tested here may also be more broadly applicable. The same reasoning we have used suggests that any strong social, cultural and religious norm may have self-relevant implications that can be decreased through self-affirmation. For instance, people may be reluctant to accept religious taboos (e.g., gay marriage) because doing so threatens self-integrity. It should be noted, however, that the current research focused on harmless transgressions. It therefore still remains a question to what extent self-affirmation decreases the moral condemnation of harmful taboo violations. It could be that the same self-protective processes play a role and that affirming the self also decreases the moral condemnation of harmful taboo violations. To our knowledge, little research has investigated the role of self-integrity in such moral judgements. Studying these processes could therefore provide a potential fruitful avenue for future research.

Last, our findings help understand which interventions are effective in reducing prejudicial attitudes towards harmless sexual taboo acts. Sexual preferences differ widely between people, and the acceptance of such preferences is vital for leading a healthy and balanced life (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Increasing the acceptability of harmless sexual taboo behaviours therefore seems important and much needed. Although the current research focused on two relatively extreme taboo behaviours, we believe that the psychological principles that underlie people's reactions to harmless sexual taboos could be similar for gay taboo acts (see Nussbaum, 2010). Indeed, our findings suggest

that in aiming to increase the acceptability of such harmless sexual taboo acts, interventions should focus on changing those who judge instead of those who are being judged.

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