Agreeableness and Religiosity as Predictors of Disgust Sensitivity

*What is disgust sensitivity?*

Disgust sensitivity refers to how **intensely** an individual feels the emotion of disgust when faced with a potentially unpleasant stimulus or scenario. It is theorised that this response developed as an **evolutionary behavioural mechanism** to protect humans and animals from disease. However, not all components of disgust sensitivity explicitly involve interaction with disease. Tybur et al. (2011) therefore thought it was important to consider these different types of disgust sensitivity separately:

**Moral**

Elicited by morally questionable scenarios.

Questions measuring this depict **anti-social** or **corrupt** behaviour.

**Sexual**

Measurements consider various sexual scenarios, such as fantasising or non-consensual interactions.

Has been found to be triggered by **‘non-traditional’** sexual acts, e.g. homosexuality, in some samples.

**Pathogen**

Negative emotions are elicited by decay and contamination.

Can be categorised by **human** (e.g. “*accidentally touching a person’s bloody cut*”)and **non-human** (e.g. “*seeing a cockroach run across the floor*”) cues.

*Why would personality and religion predict disgust sensitivity?*

Agreeableness is characterised by someone’s level of **trust**, **compassion**, and **respectfulness**, and a desire for harmonious interactions. As a result, research has suggested that increased agreeableness predicts greater disgust sensitivity due to agreeable individuals’ tendency to be sensitive to social stimuli.

We know that religiosity is a predictor of agreeableness. Religious teachings often encourage **charity**, **goodwill** and **respect**, which reflect the pro-social attitudes of an agreeable individual. How religious someone is has also been found to predict disgust sensitivity. Studies have found that as religiosity increases, so does moral, sexual and pathogen disgust sensitivity.

*The Research*

The current research aimed to explore if **agreeableness** and **religiosity** predicts **sexual** and **pathogen** disgust sensitivity. There is very little research on how all these variables interact, and existing studies are arguably contradictory.

For example, studies from the COVID-19 pandemic showed that Christian nationalists were less likely than non-religious individuals to engage in medical recommendations which reduced the risk of transmission. If greater religiosity indicates greater agreeableness, **why did this group risk endangering the lives of others?**

It has also been suggested that increased sexual disgust sensitivity in religious people is related to a heightened Behavioural Immune System. This is a “first line of defence” against pathogens, and individuals with a strong BIS often feel particularly disgusted by out-group members. Prejudiced attitudes towards certain individuals, e.g. sexual minorities, **does not reflect the compassionate attitudes of an agreeable person.**

A multiple regression analysis was used to explore the following hypotheses:

1. Increased agreeableness significantly predicts sexual disgust sensitivity
2. Increased agreeableness significantly predicts pathogen disgust sensitivity
3. Increased religiosity significantly predicts sexual disgust sensitivity
4. Increased religiosity significantly predicts pathogen disgust sensitivity

*The Results*

The study found that:

* **Increased religiosity significantly predicted increased sexual disgust sensitivity** 
  + Likely due to the importance of purity in many religions – ‘non-traditional’ sexual acts violate teachings and can be seen as sinful
* **Increased agreeableness significantly predicted decreased pathogen disgust sensitivity**
  + Possibly because a desire for positive interpersonal interactions is more important than disease avoidance to agreeable people