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“We’re Disgusted With Queers, not Fearful of Them”: The Interrelationships Among Disgust, Gay Men’s Sexual Behavior, and Homonegativity

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ABSTRACT

Using a combination of personal reflections, published literature, and original empirical research, we argue that the disgust triggered by gay men’s sexual practices (specifically, anal intercourse) is a critical, though overlooked, contributor to heterosexual men and women’s homonegativity (i.e., negative attitudes and behaviors directed toward men who are or are perceived to be gay). We conclude our article by articulating several directions for future inquiry that we believe will advance current understanding of prejudice and discrimination directed toward gay men.

KEYWORDS

Homonegativity; gay men; homophobia; disgust; sexual behavior; anal intercourse; prejudice

You people just absolutely refuse to get it don’t you? We are not now or ever have we been . . . “phobic” of gays. There is a big difference between fear and disgust. We are disgusted with “queers,” not fearful of them (Pvt X, comment on article titled, “Ratings for ABC Gay Rights Drama ‘When We Rise’ Tank After Two Episodes” (Breitbart News, March 5, 2017; <https://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2017/03/05/ratings-tank-abcs-gay-rights-drama-rise/>))

But first a caveat. . .

We begin this article by acknowledging that it deviates from conventional academic writing. It contains personal recollections, but it is not an autoethnography in the formal sense of the word. Although a large number of studies are summarized in this article, we do not pretend that it is an exhaustive review of the literature—one in which every stance is carefully “balanced” by a diametric position and qualifiers such as “perhaps,” “might,” and “suggests” litter each sentence. Finally, although we present results from a recently conducted (yet unpublished) study, we do not employ the dispassionate voice characteristic of a laboratory report. Much of the writing contained in this article is personal and, in some instances, painful. It reflects the “lived experience” of a middle-aged gay man who is a professor of psychology; a middle-aged straight woman who is also a professor of psychology;

and two 30-something gay men, one a doctoral student and the other a recent recipient of his PhD.

Like all stories, we know that readers' reactions to what we have written will vary. Some may relate to the personal accounts we describe at the start of this article, while others might think they are antiquated, of limited generalizability, or perpetuate myths of "gay victimhood." To illustrate this point, we recognize that the experience of viewing *Brokeback Mountain* in Toronto's gay village would be decidedly different from watching this film in Thunder Bay, Ontario. (We assume that, in the former locale, theatergoers would be unlikely to refer to a member of the audience as a "crying faggot"—an event that one of us experienced while living in Thunder Bay.) Some readers may dismiss our recollections as "anecdotal"—a word that is often misused to "denote a story, probably fictive, that is small, trivial, [and] inconsequential" (Dworkin, 1989, pp. xxv–xxvi). Others may recognize that, akin to any form of writing—even ostensibly "objective" accounts of psychological phenomena—the personal observations we offer are "situated, partial, [and] perspectival" (Lather, 1999, p. 3).

A tetralogy of disgust

Todd Morrison: When did I first realize that sex between men was routinely viewed as "disgusting?" To answer this question, I must return to the North American cultural landscape of the mid-1980s. A time period in which I was profoundly disturbed by my homosexuality yet ineluctably drawn to any media depictions of gay men that I could find. Given our current climate, where an array of gay-related content is a mere click or swipe away, it is difficult to believe that, not so long ago, access to depictions outside the heterosexual norm was severely curtailed. As a gay man, on a per annum basis, you could anticipate one to two "controversial" episodes of Phil Donahue; one to two "viewer discretion is advised" television movies of the week, which typically explored how a family "coped" with the knowledge that their golden boy was a "homosexual"; and countless "fag" jokes¹ in mainstream movies targeted at preteens and teenagers (e.g., *Adventures in Babysitting*, *Once Bitten*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Teen Wolf*, *Weird Science*). Representations of gay men shared a common element: they were curiously devoid of anything sexual.² Take, for example, the popular 1980s soap opera, *Dynasty*, which garnered a considerable following among gay men for various reasons, one of which was its inclusion of a central gay character: Steven Carrington. In season 5, he meets Luke Fuller, whom Adam Carrington (Steven's brother) refers to dismissively as a "little fag." In episode 16, my adolescent eyes and ears were exposed to the following exchange:

Steven knocks on the door to Luke's apartment. Luke opens the door.

Luke: Steven, what do you want?
 Steven: I have to talk to you, Luke.
 Luke: Look, I'm not the one to help you sort out your problems with your wife.
 Steven: I'm not asking you to. [Meaningful pause]. I've thought about us. And, I know what I want to do. Where I want to be. And with whom.

Steven then walks into the apartment. The music swells, the two men stand face to face, and the door closes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biLhtdlgm-A>). If the characters had been straight, the camera would have gone into that room. There would have been passionate kissing followed by a closeup of various items of clothing scattered on the floor and then candles, a bubble bath, and champagne. Isn't that how everyone had sex on *Dynasty*? Steven and Luke never kissed (not even on the cheek). They were never shown in bed; never depicted together with their shirts off; and they definitely did not shower or bathe together (with or without bubbles). They did exchange a few awkward hugs.

A final example: *Consenting Adult*, a 1985 television movie that focused on Tess and Ken Lynd's "coming to terms" with their teenage son's homosexuality. Midway through the film, the son (Jeff Lynd), who has never engaged in gay sex, walks into a diner located near a bus terminal. He sits down. Adjacent to him is another young man—who proceeds to stare at him. The two men begin conversing about the "game" in which "we massacred Oregon" and life as a college student. Jeff is in pre-med; the young man has dropped out for reasons unknown. The young man leaves, followed shortly by Jeff. They meet at the sidewalk outside the diner and resume their conversation.

Young man: Looks like another wet one.
 Jeff: Only on weekends.
 Young man: Can I give you a lift?
 Jeff: Alright.
 Young man: I'm Hank.
 Jeff: Jeff.

They walk to Hank's van. He drives. Neither talk. Thunder is heard, and it starts to rain.

Hank: You in a hurry to get to campus? It's kind of nice driving in this rain.
 Jeff: No big hurry.

Hank parks the van.

Hank: I thought we'd wait out this rain. OK? (Looks in the back of the van.)
 Jeff: (Follows Hank's gaze). No.
 Hank: Come on.
 Jeff: I can't.
 Hank: It's OK. (Hank touches Jeff's shoulder.) Who's to stop you? It's what you want, isn't it?

Jeff turns to Hank and stares at him. The camera then cuts to outside the van, with the soundtrack emphasizing the rain (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = Dj_6-OrVtj0&t = 3054s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj_6-OrVtj0&t=3054s)). Wait a minute. That's it? If the characters had been straight, the camera would have gone into that van. There would have been passionate kissing followed by a close-up of various items of clothing scattered on the floor and then candles, a bubble bath, and champagne... but I digress.

These two examples clearly illustrate that, in the mid-1980s, mainstream media's depictions of gay men scrupulously avoided any intimate behavior. It was an omission that conveyed a message: there was something about gay sex—even an action as unremarkable as a kiss—that rendered its depiction impermissible. Attractive, young, muscular, White (always White) gay men could be shown; however, their sexual behavior, which was the crux of their gayness,³ had to remain hidden. It could be inferred by numerous hugs, but never shown.

Mark Kiss: “Look at all those dirty, fucking fudge packers,” announced my closest male friend as we drove past a gay nightclub. It was the early 2000s, and we were both 17, excited to have access to a car on a weekend night. We had been previously discussing another topic—likely video games—but the sudden appearance of openly gay men had to be acknowledged and, moreover, promptly derogated. The club's moniker *Boyz Town* in conjunction with the Pride flags adorning its entranceway made it clear that this club was unmistakably gay.

I was a late bloomer when it came to publicly acknowledging that I was a gay man. However, that particular night, I definitely knew I was gay. (I had already partaken in same-sex sexual activities that far exceeded the point of naïve experimentation.) Yet I was not shocked, hurt, or even surprised when my friend referred to gay men as “fudge packers” who made him “sick.” My friend's statement was part of the rhetoric used to describe gay men not only among immature 17-year-olds, but in society at large. It felt like an indisputable element of being gay: we are disgusting.

CJ Bishop: I started “experimenting” with a friend at the tender age of 12. The fascinating aspect regarding this very rigorous experimentation was that it turned out to be a longitudinal study; one that necessitated *many* testing sessions, presumably to ensure the reproducibility of the findings. It did not take very long for me to realize that I was no longer testing my curiosity and that what was happening felt—right. While I cannot really explain why, something also told me that I couldn't tell my friend how I was feeling in case he reacted badly. Despite all the things that went on behind that closed door, we had never tried kissing, not once. So during a late-night “testing” session, I somehow talked myself into broaching the topic. The response I received was not one of interest or excitement, but shock, horror, and disbelief: “You want to KISS?! That's so fucking gross. There's no way I'm doing that!” Needless to

say, by this point his mouth was quite sullied; yet his lips coming into contact with mine would have made our physical encounters *sexual* in some way. For him, kissing represented the point of no return. He could compartmentalize our extracurricular activities and dismiss them as “innocent experimentation,” but the thought of kissing me was revolting because it would signify that he was “one of them.” By this point, I already knew I was “one of them,” but no one else did. This experience taught me to keep my sexual orientation hidden from potential romantic interests for fear of reprisal and ostracism. And I did so for several more years.

Roughly around the same time, I was watching an award show with my mother. I recall very clearly that a gay man had won an award that was not performance-related. He thanked his partner by name and mentioned that he loved him. My mom, who is much less socially conservative now (thanks to yours truly), stood up and said: “Oh my God. That’s disgusting!” I was pretty shocked that my mom reacted that way. When I asked why his sexual orientation mattered, she said: “Do you realize *those* people have sex?! That’s gross.” She then left the room. Hearing someone I cared about demonizing behavior that felt so right to me was excruciating.

My final vivid memory took place a few years later and involved my desire to see *Brokeback Mountain*. I could not find anyone—and I mean anyone—to see the film with me. On the very last day it was appearing in my local theater, I made the decision to go by myself. I recall thinking (hoping?) that, given its topic (gay “cowboys”), there would be, at most, three or four people sitting in the audience. As I walked into the cinema, I could hear dozens of loud voices emanating from an auditorium more than half full. Looking to find an empty seat, I became painfully conscious of a silence that had descended upon the audience members. I overheard someone whisper: “Oh my God; that guy’s here to see this movie himself. You know what that means.” Somewhat embarrassed, I sat as far away from people as I could manage and watched the film. Not surprisingly, I cried during the climactic scene where Ennis (Heath Ledger), finally realizing what he has sacrificed, weeps while clutching the bloodied shirt that Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) had kept for years as a memento of the time they had shared together. I was unable to eradicate the evidence that I had been emotionally moved by the film because I could hear people commenting about the “crying faggot” as they exited the theater.

Melanie Morrison: I remember sitting in a theater in Prince George, BC. The year: 1997. The movie: *The Jackal*. The film stars Bruce Willis as the title character; an assassin who, at one point in the movie, meets a gay American civil servant named Douglas. The Jackal seeks out Douglas because he is a governmental aide who may share some information inadvertently and because he presumes he will eventually need a place to stay when hiding from the “Feds.” To gain proximity to Douglas, he goes to a lounge that Douglas frequents. He is seated at the bar when Douglas arrives. With the

Jackal's offer to buy Douglas a drink, a "strange" dynamic surfaces between the two characters. The audience was silent while the two men were talking at the bar, and remained so when the Jackal and Douglas had moved to a smaller table to converse and enjoy their drinks. Indeed, the conversation appears to be going well between the two of them: Douglas is looking keen and interested, and the Jackal starts to move in closer.

Douglas: I think you should come home with me.

Jackal: I'd love to, but I can't. I have to go back to Atlanta, and finalize my very messy divorce.

Douglas: Does she know?

Jackal: She does now.

Douglas: So how am I going to see you?

Jackal: Give me one of your cards. [Douglas hands him a business card.]

Douglas: You're not going to call.

Jackal: Douglas, you just have to have a little faith in people, that's all. Like I do.

At that moment, the Jackal leans in and gives Douglas a small peck on the lips. The Jackal then moves his head backward and, this time, kisses Douglas again—with *slightly* more feeling. The Jackal then runs his hand down Douglas's face, who makes a playful biting motion. The Jackal sighs and then leaves ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = CtoPmZuGjHc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtoPmZuGjHc)). During the "kiss," the audience let out a collective gasp, with many of them yelling "Ewwwwww."

We complement our recollections by, first, defining the term *disgust*; second, elucidating why gay men may be perceived as disgusting; and, third, examining dehumanization and disgust. We then narrow our analysis to studies that investigate the relationship between disgust and homonegativity focusing on published research as well as unpublished findings that have emerged from our laboratory. We end this article by articulating directions for future inquiry, with particular attention paid to the possible ramifications of self-disgust among gay men.

What is this thing called disgust?

Researchers have suggested that disgust is a multidimensional construct. For example, Tybur, Lieberman, and Griskevicius (2009) described three forms: (1) pathogen; (2) sexual; and (3) moral. *Pathogen disgust* evolved to limit exposure to disease-causing agents and may be triggered by bodily products likely to contain infectious micro-organisms (e.g., phlegm, semen, blood, feces). Indeed, Curtis and Biran (2001) reported that fecal matter is the "source of over 20 known bacterial, viral, and protozoan causes of intestinal tract infection" (p. 23). While Tybur et al. defined *sexual disgust* in evolutionary terms (i.e., it evolved to maximize reproductive success through

avoidance of partners and behaviors that are “biologically costly” [p. 106]), we opt for a definition that is more sociocultural in scope. Specifically, we view sexual disgust as being rooted in the absence of “benign sexual variation” (Rubin, 1998, p. 108); that is, individuals prone to sexual disgust fail to embrace the belief that, when it comes to sexual behaviors and attractions, there is no “universal system that should or will work for everyone” (p. 110). In other words, viewing certain sexual practices as unorthodox, weird, or unappealing does not render those practices disgusting. Finally, *moral disgust* concerns social transgressions such as lying and stealing, which are seen as “non-normative and often anti-social” (Tybur et al., 2009, p. 106). Expanding on this traditional view of moral disgust, Russell and Giner-Sorolla (2013) identified two distinct forms: *bodily moral disgust*, which is evoked when “moral codes related to the body are violated” (p. 328), and *non-bodily moral disgust*, which focuses on social transgressions and, thus, maps onto the definition given by Tybur et al.

Gay men as vectors of disgust

Conservative organizations with an anti-gay agenda often use the “rhetoric of disgust” to garner support for their belief that sexual minorities should not be entitled to the basic rights and freedoms accorded the heterosexual majority. For example:

The typical sexual practices of homosexuals are a medical horror story—imagine exchanging saliva, feces, semen and/or blood with dozens of different men each year. Imagine drinking urine, ingesting feces and experiencing rectal trauma on a regular basis. ... Further, many of them occur in extremely unsanitary places (bathrooms, dirty peep shows), or, because homosexuals travel so frequently, in other parts of the world. (Family Research Institute: <http://www.familyresearchinst.org/2009/02/medical-consequences-of-what-homosexuals-do/>)

In this statement, the Family Research Institute used language to produce a visceral reaction.⁴ According to this group—whose mandate is to “generate empirical research on issues that threaten the traditional family, particularly homosexuality, AIDS, sexual social policy, and drug abuse” (<http://www.familyresearchinst.org/about/>)—gay men incorporate waste products, such as urine and feces, into their sexual practices. They exchange saliva and blood, substances that are often viewed as disgusting (e.g., Tolin, Lohr, Sawchuk, & Lee, 1997), while engaging in orgiastic feats situated near toilets and “dirty” (as opposed to sanitary) peep-shows.

The conflation of gay men’s sexual practices with anal intercourse and the implicit assumption that this type of activity seldom occurs among heterosexual persons are noteworthy because both beliefs are contradicted by available evidence. For example, Rosenberger and colleagues (2011) noted

that gay and bisexual participants in their large-scale online survey reported “a diverse sexual repertoire” and that “partnered sexual behaviors between men [were] not dominated by anal intercourse (AI)” (p. 3045). Specifically, data provided by 24,787 gay or bisexual men residing in the United States revealed that participants’ most recent male-partnered sexual events were: giving oral sex (75%), kissing their partner on the mouth (74.8%), and receiving oral sex (73.4%). Activities involving the anus were far less common: receptive AI (35.5%), insertive AI (33.8%), receptive anilingus (26.1%), and insertive anilingus (25.4%). Owen and colleagues (2015) systematically reviewed 136 articles examining the practice of AI among self-identified heterosexual young people (i.e., <25 years of age) residing in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Among participants classified as non-high risk (i.e., had never been a patient at an STI clinic and were not members of a marginalized group such as the homeless), lifetime prevalence rates of AI among men and women were 22.7% and 21.5%, respectively. Thus in the studies reviewed, approximately 1 in 5 heterosexual men and women under the age of 25 had practiced AI.

Despite research indicating that gay men engage in a constellation of sexual practices, Western cultural discourses involving gay men persist in conflating their identity with the practice of anal intercourse. To illustrate: of the 65 slang terms identified by Wikipedia as being directed at gay men, 21 (32.3%) focus on anal sex. These are: anal assassin, arse bandit, backdoor bandit, brownie king, bugger, bum bandit, bum boy, bum-driller, bum-hole engineer, butt pirate, donut puncher, fudge-packer, jobby jabber, marmite miner, pillow biter, ring raider, shirt-lifter, shit-stabber, sod, turd burglar, and uphill gardener. Such colorful descriptors convey a unitary message: gay men are what they (are perceived to) do. The stigma that surrounds anal sex, especially when it is practiced receptively by gay men (see Branfman, Stiritz, & Anderson, 2017), reinforces traditional distinctions between “heterosexual/masculine/normal” and “homosexual/feminine/abnormal” men (Branfman & Ekberg Stiritz, 2012, p. 409).

Past theorizing about disgust (e.g., Tybur et al.’s [2009] tripartite model) underscores gay men’s capacity to trigger this emotion.⁵ To elaborate: (1) pathogen disgust may be evoked by the belief that gay men engage in sexual practices (namely, anal intercourse) that place them in an unhealthy proximity to feces and, thus, put others at risk of “infection” (e.g., hepatitis A and E, amoebiasis, *E. coli*); (2) members of the heterosexual majority, who do not embrace the concept of benign sexual variation, may experience sexual disgust when seeing or thinking about physically intimate behavior between gay men; (3) certain groups of persons (e.g., religious fundamentalists) may experience non-bodily moral disgust when seeing or thinking about gay men in general; and (4) akin to sexual disgust, bodily moral disgust may be triggered by seeing or thinking about physically intimate behavior between

gay men. While obviously related, we believe sexual disgust and bodily moral disgust are distinguishable on the grounds of perceived moral impropriety. Bodily moral disgust is activated when individuals believe that a sexual practice is taboo and violates a given moral code (e.g., anal intercourse between two men is against God's law), whereas sexual disgust occurs without reference to taboos and morality (e.g., anal intercourse between two men is disgusting because it involves feces). The latter occurs because, due to an absence of benign sexual variation, the perceiver cannot imagine engaging in the behavior performed by the target.

Dehumanization and disgust

To better understand the relationship between disgust and homonegativity toward gay men, it is critical to briefly review the concept of dehumanization (i.e., the failure to consider the consciousness and lived experience of another person and, essentially, to deny that person his or her humanity; Harris & Fiske, 2006). Both constructs appear to play a critical role in the derogation of gay men. First, neuroimaging studies have observed that when a target stimulus is considered less than human (i.e., dehumanized), it activates the medial prefrontal cortex, a brain region that is associated with disgust (Harris & Fiske, 2006). Second, on a theoretical level, both dehumanization and disgust involve keeping "othered" individuals or objects in their subordinate place and away from the ingroup (Hodson & Costello, 2007; Hodson, Kteily, & Hoffarth, 2014). Third, and finally, dehumanization and disgust are often evaluated concurrently within psychological literature (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2008).

There has been a lengthy, documented history of people dehumanizing others to gain personal or group superiority and/or resources (Haslam, 2006; Hodson et al., 2014). In daily interactions, people may subconsciously dehumanize individuals or groups through "othering" (referring to a group as "those people" or "them or they" as opposed to "us" or "we"; Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007). Dehumanization relies on an individual's ability to categorize people using an "ingroup" and "outgroup" schema, whereby similarities to the ingroup are minimized and differences are exaggerated.

Building on this basic framework, Leyens et al. (2007) introduced the concept of *infracommunication*—that is, the perception that, in comparison to the ingroup, outgroups are more emotionally animalistic. This process, which is believed to be relatively subtle, involves attributing primary emotions (i.e., common emotions associated with humans and nonhumans such as happiness and sadness) to both ingroups and outgroups but secondary emotions (i.e., emotions perceived to be uniquely human such as remorse and appreciation) to ingroup members only. As a result of these differences,

outgroups are believed to possess fewer human emotions or emotional capabilities compared to ingroups.

As noted with dehumanization, it is posited that disgust may be related to humans' repugnance toward anything reminding them of their animalistic nature (e.g., bodily products such as sweat, blood, urine, and feces: Rozin et al., 2008). The *interspecies model of prejudice* (Hodson et al., 2014) elucidates the linkages among attitudes toward nonhuman animals, the dehumanization of marginalized social groups, and their elicitation of disgust. In a recent series of studies detailing the psychometric characteristics of a scale assessing humans' solidarity with animals, Amiot and Bastion (2017) reported that solidarity scores correlated negatively with indices of racism, ageism, and, for female participants only, sexism. An inverse relationship also was identified between solidarity and speciesism (i.e., a belief system stipulating that human beings are superior to animals and, consequently, may "use" animals as they see fit). Overall, available research suggests that minimizing the human-animal divide (see Hodson et al., 2014) appears to be associated with less negativity toward marginalized groups. What remains unclear, at this juncture, is if: (1) disgust precedes dehumanization; (2) dehumanization precedes disgust; (3) the two constructs co-occur; (4) the two constructs share a relationship that reciprocally intensifies; or (5) the two constructs are mediated by an unknown third variable.

Disgust and homonegativity

Available research makes it clear that disgust, whether conceptualized as an individual difference variable or treated as an induced state, is linked with homonegativity (e.g., Cunningham, Forestell, & Dickter, 2013; Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009b; Tapias, Glaser, Keltner, Vasquez, & Wickens, 2006). Each of these streams of research (i.e., disgust as a characterological variable or as an induced state) will be reviewed briefly.

Disgust sensitivity

Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom (2009a) found that, among a small sample of American undergraduate students ($N = 84$), participants reporting greater disgust sensitivity were less supportive of gay marriage. In an effort to circumvent impression management concerns, the same team of researchers (2009b) examined the relationship between disgust sensitivity and implicit attitudes toward gay men, using the implicit association test (IAT). Again, a modest sample of American undergraduate students ($N = 82$) was used. As predicted, those more prone to experience disgust (i.e., greater in disgust sensitivity) reported less favorable implicit evaluations of gay targets.

Positive associations between disgust sensitivity and a range of indices of homonegativity have been documented. These include subjective ambivalence toward gay men (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2014); old-fashioned homonegativity (Hodson et al., 2013; Olatunji, 2008; Tapias et al., 2006; [Study 2]; Terrizzi, Shook, & Ventis, 2010; [Study 1]); and feeling thermometers in which a “colder” assigned temperature denotes greater prejudice toward the outgroup in question (Crawford, Inbar, & Maloney, 2014; Hodson et al., 2013).

Disgust induction

With respect to *induced* disgust, several studies have observed that when individuals are disgusted they evidence greater negativity toward sexual minority persons (e.g., Adams, Stewart, & Blanchar, 2014). We will focus on three experimental studies that nicely capture the relationship between disgust induction and homonegativity.

First, Dasgupta et al. (2009) instructed 130 university students to write about a personal event that made them angry, disgusted, or emotionally neutral. To assist with this task, participants also were shown three photographs that reflected the emotion in question (i.e., those in the disgust condition were shown images such as cockroaches on food). The implicit association test (IAT) was used to measure anti-gay bias. Faster responses for the block containing heterosexual symbols paired with positive words and homosexual symbols paired with negative words than for the block containing heterosexual symbols paired with negative words and homosexual symbols paired with positive words denoted greater bias. As predicted, those in the disgust induction condition evidenced more anti-gay bias in comparison to those in the anger induction or control group. Underscoring the unique role that disgust plays in homonegativity, this finding was not replicated in a subsequent experiment that measured attitudes toward another derogated group (Arab men). For this target, participants instructed to recall and write about an experience that made them angry evidenced greater implicit bias than their disgust or control counterparts.

Second, Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom (2012) randomly assigned heterosexual undergraduate students ($N = 59$) to either a noxious smell condition (i.e., a novelty odorant that was sprayed in a trashcan located in the corner of a 600-square foot laboratory) or a no-smell control. Participants then completed feeling thermometers about various social groups. A 3-item manipulation check indicated that, in comparison to controls, participants in the smell condition found the room's odor to be significantly worse. While participants in the smell condition evaluated gay men less favorably than they did heterosexual men, the control group did not differ in their assessments of gay versus straight targets. Finally, the effect of the noxious odor (i.e., induced disgust) did not generalize to other marginalized social groups

such as elderly persons, African American individuals, and lesbian women. Nor was the effect moderated by political orientation (i.e., for both liberal and conservative participants, exposure to a noxious odor decreased “warm” feelings toward gay men). Subsequent communication with the senior author of this study (Inbar, October 16, 2016) revealed that the novelty spray, unnamed in the source article, simulated flatulence. Thus, to paraphrase these authors, “it appears that exposure to a [fecal odor] affected attitudes toward gay men specifically, rather than outgroups in general” (p. 25). While tentative, we believe these results are congruent with our theorizing that gay men’s sexual behavior (in particular, the practice of anal intercourse) plays a critical role in the relationship between disgust and homonegativity.

Using data provided by 143 heterosexual American college students, Cunningham et al. (2013) randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions: a vial containing isovaleric and butyric acids (labeled body odor); a vial containing the same acids (labeled Parmesan cheese); and a vial containing no odor (labeled clean air). After sniffing their assigned vial, participants viewed 42 black-and-white images of gay, lesbian, and straight couples and, after pressing a space bar, evaluated each one using a 9-point rating scale (1 = *very unpleasant*; 9 = *very pleasant*). The time between exposure to each image and pressing the space bar to terminate exposure to said picture serve as a measure of implicit bias (i.e., the briefer the interval between the two, the greater the bias). Participants also completed feeling thermometers, a measure of old-fashioned homonegativity, and an indicator of pathogen, sexual, and moral disgust. Results indicated that, for participants assigned to the body odor condition, the average viewing time for images of gay male couples was significantly shorter than the average viewing time for images of heterosexual couples. The researchers did not report statistically significant differences in viewing times between heterosexual and lesbian couples in the body odor group. The difference in feeling thermometer scores between straight and gay male couples also was significantly greater for those assigned to the body odor group. (A greater difference suggests greater bias between the two couples.) A similar difference did not emerge for the other odor conditions (Parmesan cheese and control). Similar to the finding reported by Inbar and colleagues (2012), the effects of the noxious odor did not generalize to other marginalized groups (e.g., African Americans, elderly persons).

We would like to conclude this section by summarizing a recent experiment conducted by the third author (Bishop). In this study, 399 heterosexual participants (186 males; 213 females) attending a university in Western Canada were randomly assigned to one of seven conditions that manipulated exposure to same-sex couples versus other-sex couples engaged in “everyday intimacies” or “symbolic threats.” “Everyday intimacies” were operationalized as intimate behaviors such as kissing and embracing that may occur in public.

“Symbolic threats” referred to any action performed by a subordinate group, which the dominant group perceives as undermining its moral superiority (e.g., sexual minority persons pursuing the legal right to get married). All images in this study were pilot-tested (i.e., images retained as “everyday intimacy” stimuli were those identified by pilot participants as being most likely to occur in public and as depicting “partners” in a relationship).

Participants completed a battery of measures; however, only a subset are pertinent to the topic of disgust and homonegativity (see Table 1). The psychometric properties of indices of modern homonegativity (MHS; Morrison & Morrison, 2003) and old-fashioned homonegativity (ATLG-S; Herek, 1988) as well as the Three Domain Disgust Scale (TDDS; Olatunji et al., 2007) are well established. They also were satisfactory with this sample (e.g., Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranged from .77 to .94, and correlations among measures were in anticipated directions suggesting convergent validity).

Given that Bishop created a new measure for the purposes of this study (i.e., the Attitudes toward Public Displays of Affection [PDA] scale), strands of evidence attesting to its psychometric adequacy are required. First, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were good (females = .87; males = .91 = males). Second, a single factor solution, confirmed by parallel analysis, was identified (eigenvalue = 3.04; 76.1% variance accounted for). Third, scores on the PDA correlated significantly with a composite measure of homonegativity ($r = .32$, $p < .001$) and with sexual disgust ($r = .35$, $p < .001$), but not with pathogen ($r = .04$) or moral ($r = .04$) disgust. Given such findings, it was concluded that the PDA appeared to be suitable for the objectives of this experiment.

Bishop selected PDA⁶ as a potential mediator because previous research has suggested that, when viewing images of nude or semi-nude gay male couples, erotophobia (i.e., a general discomfort with, and negative

Table 1. List of relevant measures.

Measure
Modern Homonegativity Scale (MHS; Morrison & Morrison, 2003)
12-item Gay Version
12-item Lesbian Version
Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG-S; Herek, 1988)
5-item Gay Version
5-item Lesbian Version
Perceptions of Public Displays of Affection (PPDA; Bishop & Morrison, 2017)
4 items
Three Domain Disgust Scale (TDDS; Tybur et al., 2009)
7-item Moral Disgust
7-item Pathogen Disgust
7-item Sexual Disgust

Note: Scores on the modern and old-fashioned measures of homonegativity (i.e., MHS-G, MHS-L, ATG, and ATL) were significantly intercorrelated (r s ranging from .68 to .96, p s < .001). Thus we used principal component analysis (PCA) to see if the measures would load on a single component. A one-component solution was obtained (eigenvalue = 3.29; 82.25% total variance accounted for), with component loadings ranging from .89 to .92. This component was subsequently used for all tests of mediation.

attitudes toward, sexual behavior; Fisher, White, Byrne, & Kelley, 1988) serves as a potential confound. Consider, for example, research conducted by Mahaffey, Bryan, and Hutchison (2005), which examined the affective responses of self-identified heterosexual undergraduate men when viewing images of individual naked men and women (study 1; $N = 58$) and naked gay and heterosexual couples (study 2; $N = 100$). Findings from the first study indicated that participants evidencing higher levels of homonegativity displayed greater startle eye-blink activity when viewing images of nude men. Importantly, Mahaffey et al. (2005) identified an interaction between erotophobia and homonegativity (i.e., regardless of the target's sex, homonegative men that were more erotophobic displayed a greater startle eye-blink response). This pattern did not emerge for homonegative men that were not erotophobic. The images in Bishop's study were not sexually explicit; however, as they depicted intimate behavior, he felt it was important to assess a related construct (namely, the perceived acceptability of public displays of affection; Doan, Miller, & Loehr, 2015).

The following mediational model was tested. First, it was predicted that heterosexual participants' exposure to everyday intimacies performed by sexual minority persons would trigger sexual disgust. (It was unclear whether these types of intimacies would trigger pathogen or moral disgust.) Second, it was predicted that sexual disgust would be positively associated with homonegativity. Third, Bishop tested whether this association would be mediated by attitudes toward public displays of affection (i.e., as levels of sexual disgust increase so would negative views of affection displayed in public; as the latter intensifies so, too, would homonegativity).

Basic mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (model 4: <http://www.processmacro.org/index.html>). The number of bootstrap samples tested for bias-corrected confidence intervals was 10,000. As shown in Table 2, when male and female participants viewed everyday intimacies, PDA mediated the relationship between sexual disgust and homonegativity. In other words, greater levels of disgust were associated with more negative attitudes toward public displays of affection, and these, in turn, were associated with greater homonegativity. When male participants viewed symbolic threats (e.g., images of gay couples getting married or rearing children), a similar mediation model was identified. Thus it appears that, for the heterosexual males in our study, the mere presence of gay men—whether engaging in mildly romantic gestures, getting married, or interacting as a couple with one or more children—was sufficient to trigger sexual disgust. Importantly, no mediation occurred for female participants shown symbolic threats. As well, no mediated effects were identified when pathogen or moral disgust was used in lieu of sexual disgust.

Table 2. 95% confidence intervals for mediated (indirect) and direct effects.

	Men	Women
Everyday Intimacies		
Sexual Disgust → PDA	.0381 - .3738*	.0917 - .4164**
PDA → Homonegativity	.0192 - .4043*	.0101 - .4583*
Sexual Disgust → Homonegativity	.0776 - .3186**	-.0666 - .2088
Indirect Effect	.005 - .111	.0065 - .1669
Symbolic Threats		
Sexual Disgust → PDA	.0652 - .4012*	.0563 - .3964**
PDA → Homonegativity	-.0037 - .3787	-.1867 - .2458
Sexual Disgust → Homonegativity	.0794 - .3089**	.1857 - .4700
Indirect Effect	.0058 - .1045	-.0291 - .0672
Everyday Intimacies		
Moral Disgust → PDA	-.1253 - .2148	-.1583 - .2588
PDA → Homonegativity	.1095 - .5099**	.0768 - .4904**
Moral Disgust → Homonegativity	-.077 - .1703	-.1643 - .1336
Indirect Effect	-.0300 - .0738	-.0381 - .0889
Symbolic Threats		
Moral Disgust → PDA	-.1921 - .2431	-.2640 - .2390
PDA → Homonegativity	.1134 - .5054**	-.0392 - .4428
Moral Disgust → Homonegativity	-.0633 - .2176	-.1826 - .2574
Indirect Effect	-.0558 - .1052	-.1826 - .2574
Everyday Intimacies		
Pathogen Disgust → PDA	-.2774 - .1055	-.1481 - .3107
PDA → Homonegativity	.1011 - .5007**	.0842 - .4964**
Pathogen Disgust → Homonegativity	-.2165 - .0550	-.2278 - .0997
Indirect Effect	-.0979 - .0261	-.0404 - .1107
Symbolic Threats		
Pathogen Disgust → PDA	-.2278 - .2231	-.2121 - .2123
PDA → Homonegativity	.1169 - .5101**	-.0328 - .4352
Pathogen Disgust → Homonegativity	-.0777 - .2140	-.0178 - .3426
Indirect Effect	-.0613 - .0632	-.0496 - .0585

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Where do we go from here?

Given the dearth of research concerning the relationship between homonegativity and individual differences in disgust sensitivity and/or disgust induction, a number of questions emerge. For instance, evoking olfactory disgust appears to predict negative attitudes towards gay men (e.g., Inbar et al., 2012); however, researchers have yet to elucidate why this linkage exists. Why does a noxious odor have the power to induce colder feelings toward gay men and not toward other marginalized groups? Is the linkage between disgust and homonegativity potentiated by specific types of noxious odors (e.g., the smell of feces versus vomit, for instance)? In accordance with our theorizing, we believe that smells associated with anal intercourse should be particularly potent elicitors of sexual disgust, which, in turn, should contribute to the dehumanization of gay men and anti-gay prejudice and discrimination. However, the veracity of this claim awaits further research.

While heterosexual persons are the focus of research on sexual disgust and homonegativity, it is vital to acknowledge that the cultural discourses surrounding same-sex sexual behavior permeate gay men's psyche. As we illustrated at the start of this article, the message that gay men's sexual practices are viewed as disgusting by the heterosexual majority is conveyed in multitudinous ways. Further, we believe this message invariably affects how gay men see themselves as sexual beings. A recent study by Bianchi and colleagues (2016) underscored that gay men's internalized homonegativity (i.e., negative attitudes and behaviors that gay individuals adopt due to prolonged exposure to an antigay environment; Mayfield, 2001; Meyer, 1995) is responsive to the broader social context. Specifically, 53 self-identified gay men from an Italian sports association were assigned randomly to one of two supraliminal priming conditions: neutral categorical primes (gay) or pejorative categorical primes (fag). Before the priming manipulation, participants reported their level of "outness" (i.e., the degree to which they were forthcoming about their sexual orientation). Following the priming manipulation, participants completed a series of measures, one of which assessed internalized homonegativity. A statistically significant interaction was identified between outness and internalized homonegativity in which supraliminal exposure to words such as *fag* and *fairy* increased gay participants' self-dislike, but only among those high in outness. Thus, paradoxically, gay men who would appear to be most comfortable with their sexual orientation (i.e., are most "out") also appear to be most vulnerable to the damaging effects of anti-gay epithets. It is unknown, at present, whether out gay men are also most vulnerable to the societal view that how they express physical intimacy with one another is disgusting.

As researchers continue to investigate the relationship between disgust and homonegativity, there will be a need to elucidate ways in which this linkage can be broken. Feinberg and colleagues (2014), for example, detailed the role that cognitive reappraisal can play in attenuating the prejudice that ensues from the elicitation of disgust. In their third experimental study, 59 participants recruited from Craigslist Web sites were randomly assigned to one of two instructional sets. Those in the control group were told that they would be watching "a series of film clips from Oscar-winning movies and [would] answer various questions regarding the clips" (p. 518). Individuals assigned to the reappraisal condition were told that they should watch the clips and "try to think about what you are seeing in such a way that you don't feel anything at all" (p. 518). Three film clips were shown, with the last one, from *Brokeback Mountain*, containing 45 seconds of two men kissing and embracing each other. Participants then answered questions about the immorality of "homosexuals" and support for same-sex marriage. Results indicated that, among participants categorized as conservative on the basis of a number of indicators, reappraisal decreased homonegativity (i.e., these individuals were less likely to see homosexuality as immoral and evidenced greater support for gay marriage). Reappraisal did not have an effect on participants classified as liberal. At this point, it is unclear if reappraisal can effectively combat disgust that

is induced through other means (e.g., olfactory) or reduce forms of homonegativity that are implicit (e.g., the IAT) or measured in ways that are more psychometrically sophisticated.

Conclusion

Researchers have allocated considerable attention to documenting the prevalence of homonegativity and identifying its myriad correlates (see Grey, Robinson, Coleman, & Bockting, 2013). Emphasis has been placed on gay men as a social category, and little interest has been paid to their sexual behavior. The elision of sex in the study of homonegativity is deeply problematic because gay men's sexual behavior may be seen as constituting their principal point of departure from heterosexual men. The desexualizing of homonegativity also has resulted in an odd asymmetry between researchers and laypeople. Researchers measure endorsement of belief statements contained in scales such as Herek's (1988) ATLG and Morrison and Morrison's (2003) MHS, and they delineate associative patterns between these beliefs and individual difference variables. The research is "cool," "objective," and dispassionate. Laypeople, especially those with an anti-gay agenda (e.g., Family Research Council), focus on gay men's sexual practices—in particular, those that involve "disgusting" orifices such as the anus and "disgusting" fluids such as spit and ejaculate. There is nothing objective or dispassionate about their discourse; rather, the overarching goal is to trigger revulsion—to brand a group of humans as nothing more than "disgusting" vectors of moral transgression and physical contamination.

Recent efforts to measure disgust toward gay men and its relationship with prejudice and discrimination play an important role in furthering our understanding of homonegativity. Innovative strategies such as cognitive reappraisal also may highlight ways in which the disgust-homonegativity "chain" may be broken.

Notes

1. Watching movies that ridiculed "fags" was acceptable. Watching talk shows or movies of the week that focused on gay men demanded strategy: As an ostensibly heterosexual person, how could I justify being interested in this type of material? Would the mere act of watching *Consenting Adult*, for example, serve as an unspoken confession? Could my sexual identity be inferred from my desire to watch a program that focused on a gay teenager?
2. The omission of gay sexuality does not mean that homonegative humor lacks a sexual component. Beyond the inherent amusement of words such as *homo*, *fag*, and *faggot*, emphasis was often placed on the sexual practices of gay men. Of course, gay sexuality itself, in terms of sexual activities between men, was elided. Thus, while two supporting characters in *Once Bitten* (1985) could bemoan that, due to a mishap in the locker room, they were now "rump-rangers," the viewer never saw any physical manifestation of this description.

3. One reviewer disagreed, asserting that “being gay is not principally about having sex with other men.” However, outside the realm of same-sex emotional/sexual attraction, what unique biological, psychological, or cultural marker reliably differentiates “being gay” from “being straight”?
4. The lengthier entry from which this text was extracted links gay men’s sexual activity with death, intestinal parasites, colostomy bags, “urine sex,” “fecal sex,” “tearing and ripping of the anal wall,” “fecal discharge,” ingestion of medically significant amounts of feces,” and the insertion of “bottles, carrots, and even gerbils” into the rectum. “Lesbians” are mentioned only five times.
5. Throughout this article, we have suggested that gay men may be regarded as disgusting because anal intercourse is widely (mis)perceived as a common practice among members of this social category. This behavior, especially when engaged in receptively, constitutes a nexus of taboos: violation of hegemonic standards of masculinity (i.e., “real” men fuck, they don’t get fucked); a disconcerting proximity to feces and attendant concerns about germs/disease; and, given its non-procreative and “base” nature, the capacity to erode the distinction between humans and animals and, hence, undermine our faith in speciesism. Yet we also reviewed studies suggesting that the induction of disgust increases homonegativity toward gay men. This raises the question: Do gay men trigger disgust, or are they the unintended recipients of prejudice and discrimination when individuals experience (or are prone to experience) disgust? We speculate that both questions may be answered in the affirmative. Gay men are capable of eliciting disgust—hence, the association between disgust sensitivity and homonegative attitudes. As well, individuals, when in a disgusted state, may perceive gay men as possible sources of their disgust and, thus, negatively evaluate them.
6. Anecdotally, we have witnessed undergraduate students use public displays of affection to render intelligible (and palatable) the sexual disgust they experience when viewing sexually explicit footage of gay men. The rationale is “I have nothing against gay sex. I just don’t want to watch any kind of sex.” It is interesting that this rationale seldom, if ever, surfaces when the sexually explicit content is heterosexual in nature.

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